Data for Governance Alliance Policy Brief No. 41

Keeping up with the people's agenda: Popular priorities for government action, and how they are evolving

Mohamed Najib Ben Saad and Carolyn Logan

9 August 2024

AFRO BAROMETER
Let the people have a say

Data for Governance Alliance
African voices for African policy

Funded by the European Union

Previously published as Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 833

Copyright ©Data for Governance Alliance and Afrobarometer 2024

Summary

Agenda setting is a key function of governments. Whenever resources are limited – i.e. always – governments must set priorities before they leap into policy action. But agendas can be set in many ways. They can follow the whims of leaders. They can be shaped by lobbyists or other proponents or beneficiaries of particular courses of action. In Africa, agenda setting has often been contested, with many complaining that priorities are driven by external actors such as international financial institutions or bilateral or global patrons.

Since 2000, the United Nations has collectively played a more prominent role, initially through eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that fundamentally shaped the international development discourse from 2000 to 2015. The MDGs were followed by the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2015-2030 (United Nations, 2024). Also in 2015, the African Union adopted "Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want," reflecting significant progress in bringing the agenda-setting prerogative back onto the African continent (African Union, 2015).

However, it is no secret that Agenda 2063 is a broad and ambitious plan. With 20 goals and 39 "priority areas," trying to implement all of it would likely overwhelm the capabilities of even the most well-resourced government. Agenda 2063 establishes a useful development framework for the continent, but individual countries still have a lot of work to do to identify their own specific priorities.

While governments can turn to varied sources of data, insight, and information in setting their priorities, Afrobarometer has long argued that a critical place to start should be understanding citizens' priorities. That is why Afrobarometer has been capturing data on popular priorities since its inception in 1999, meaning we have up to 25 years of data on the public's agenda in some countries, and at least 10 years of data in 30 countries. Every Afrobarometer survey asks people what they think the most important issues are that their government should address, and accepts up to three responses per person. We then code respondents' open-ended answers into roughly three dozen policy sectors.

This report presents findings on the popular agenda from our recent Round 9 surveys, conducted in 39 countries between late 2021 and mid-2023, and tracks how priorities have evolved over time across 30 countries where we have data since Round 5 (2011/2013). We report the findings from several perspectives: 1) continent-wide priorities and how they have shifted over time; 2) how priorities differ across socio-demographic groups (based on age, gender, urban-rural location, education, and economic status); and 3) priorities at the country level and how they have evolved over time. The key findings are summarised below and illustrated in the extensive charts and tables that follow.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. (See Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates.)

Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice that yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

This 39-country analysis is based on 53,444 interviews. The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples. When reporting multi-country averages, all countries are weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size).

Copyright ©Data for Governance Alliance and Afrobarometer 2024

Key findings

Overall direction of African countries

- Across 39 African countries, we find widespread pessimism: 66% of respondents believe their country is heading in the wrong direction (Figure 1).
    - These assessments are rapidly getting worse. Ten years ago, citizens in 30 countries were evenly divided between "right direction" (47%) and "wrong direction" (46%). But after a 20-percentage-point decline in positive assessments, those who say "wrong direction" now outnumber those who take the positive view by a 2-to-1 margin.
    - Majorities in 30 out of 39 countries agree that things are heading in the wrong direction, led by 92% of Sudanese and 91% of Gabonese (Figure 2).

The continental perspective on public priorities

- Economic issues top the list of public concerns, with one in three Africans (33%) citing unemployment as one of the most critical issues for government to address and nearly as many mentioning management of the economy (29%). Another 12% prioritise poverty (ranked 10th) (Figure 3). Overall, 84% of all respondents mention economic concerns (Figure 4).
- Public infrastructure is also a top concern, placing water supply (22%) and infrastructure/roads (22%) fourth and fifth and electricity supply (12%) ninth. In total, six in 10 respondents (60%) identify infrastructure issues as critical.
- Nearly as many (58%) identify social service delivery, including almost one in three who mention health (29%, ranked third) and one in five who cite education (20%, ranked sixth) as a priority.
- Governance issues are mentioned by 42%, including 20% who prioritise crime and security (seventh) and 11% who cite corruption (11th).
- Food and agricultural issues are mentioned by one in four respondents (26%), including food shortages (15%, eighth) as well as farming, agriculture, and agricultural marketing (9%).

Differing perspectives on what is most important

While these aggregate findings give us a broad overview of popular priorities, it is important to look beyond them to see how priorities vary across demographic groups, as the differences are often quite substantial.

- Some of the starkest differences are evident when we compare people who experience the highest levels of poverty to those who are most economically secure. Respondents who are experiencing high levels of lived poverty[1] put far more emphasis than those who are better off on water supply (32% vs. 8%), food shortage (21% vs. 7%), and infrastructure/roads (23% vs. 13%), and significantly less emphasis on management of the economy (23% vs. 33%) (Figure 5).

[1] Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

Copyright ©Data for Governance Alliance and Afrobarometer 2024

- Large differences are also associated with education level. Compared to citizens with post-secondary qualifications, those with no formal schooling are much more likely to mention water supply (32% vs. 12%), food shortage (25% vs. 8%), and agricultural issues (13% vs. 3%), while the most educated are far more concerned about unemployment (42% vs. 20%) (Figure 6).

- We also find that urban residents are significantly more concerned about unemployment than their rural counterparts (41% vs. 26%), as well as about economic management (33% vs. 26%) and crime/security (23% vs. 17%), but less concerned about water supply (14% vs. 29%) and infrastructure (17% vs. 26%) (Figure 7).

- Age-related differences are much more modest: Compared to seniors, youth express greater concern about unemployment (36% vs. 27%) and education (21% vs. 16%), but differences are otherwise not significant (Figure 8).

- There are no significant gender differences when it comes to priorities for government action.

Unique country challenges and priorities

Understanding the priority problems at the continental level should not obscure the specific challenges faced by individual countries. These findings are summarised in the infographic on pages 12-14 and Figures 9-16, including:

- Unemployment, the top issue continentally, ranks as the most frequently mentioned problem in 11 of the 39 surveyed countries. It is cited by half or more of respondents in seven countries, led by Cabo Verde (60%), and by 20% or more in 30 countries (Figure 9). But prioritising jobs is not universal: In Seychelles and Sudan, fewer than 10% mention employment as a priority.

- While economic management and health tie for second place continentally, the country profiles for these issues are quite different. Economic management is the highest priority in 14 countries, is cited by an overwhelming 92% of all Tunisians, and tops 50% in two other countries (Sudan and Malawi) (Figure 10). Health is the leading concern in just four countries – Angola (44%), São Tomé and Príncipe (40%), Tanzania (38%), and Uganda (48%) – and is the second-highest concern in another eight, including Gabon (52%), the only country where it tops 50% (Figure 11).

- The top issues in other countries are more varied:
    - Water supply takes the top spot in Benin (43%) and Mozambique (37%) and ranks second in seven countries, led by Guinea (49%) (Figure 12).
    - Infrastructure/roads lead in Guinea (58%) and Lesotho (46%) (Figure 13), while education is the dominant issue in Liberia (47%) and Mauritania (42%) and is also cited by 43% of Gabonese (third-highest issue) (Figure 14).
    - More than half of Burkinabè raise concerns about crime and security (53%), making it the No. 1 issue there. It is also the top issue in Nigeria (41%) and ranks second in Mali (49%), Cabo Verde (46%), and four other countries (Figure 15).
    - Finally, the No. 1 concern in Niger and Mali is food shortage or famine, cited by 53% and 50%, respectively (Figure 16).

Copyright ©Data for Governance Alliance and Afrobarometer 2024

Tracking the trends

Over a decade that saw the COVID-19 pandemic, fluctuating economic conditions, and surging political instability in some areas, popular evaluations of priority problems have evolved as well:

- The overall focus on unemployment has not changed dramatically: Mentions of the issue across 30 countries tracked for the past decade are down just 3 percentage points, from 37% to 34% (Figure 17).
  - But seven countries experienced large decreases (8 percentage points or more) in prioritisation of this issue, led by declines of 24 points in Tunisia and 20 points in South Africa.
  - Four countries saw similarly substantial increases, led by Togo (+12 points).
- The largest shift occurred in prioritisation of economic management, which has increased by 14 percentage points over the past decade (Figure 17).
  - Only one country, Uganda, saw a substantial decline in priority on this issue (-13 points), while 18 countries recorded marked increases, led by Zambia (+37 points), Tunisia (+36 points), Senegal (+34 points), and Ghana (+31 points).[2]
- Despite the COVID-19 pandemic that shook the world in 2020-2021, there is no aggregate increase in prioritisation of health issues across 30 countries (Figure 17).
  - But as civil and political unrest has taken hold of the country, health has dropped by 29 points in Burkina Faso, whereas both Cabo Verdeans (+15 points) and Ugandans (+16 points) are placing much more emphasis on this issue compared to a decade ago.
- In aggregate, water supply has remained essentially unchanged as a priority. But we see again that Burkinabè have shifted their focus, with a 36-point drop-off on this issue, along with significant decreases in Mauritius, Malawi, Cabo Verde, and Botswana and significant increases in Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe (Figure 18).
- We also see little aggregate change in the importance of infrastructure and education (Figure 18), although focus on infrastructure more than doubled in Lesotho (+25 points), and prioritisation of education saw major declines in Sierra Leone (-19 points) and Zambia (-19 points). But more Ugandans (+14 points) and Guineans (+13 points) are turning toward education.
- Crime/security is the second issue on which we see heightened concern not just in a few countries, but in the aggregate 30-country indicator, which increased by 7 points between 2011/2013 and 2021/2023 (Figure 19).
  - Several countries record remarkable increases, including Burkina Faso (+45 points), Mali (+40 points), Niger (+27 points), Senegal (+24 points), and Sudan (+15 points), all of which have recently experienced coups or serious political unrest.
  - Only Tunisians (-23 points) show a comparable decrease in this concern.
- Even as economic management has grown as a concern, food security (-3 points) and poverty (-9 points) have declined (Figure 19). While all three reflect economic

[2] Due to rounding, percentage-point changes may appear to differ by 1 point from reported percentages (e.g. for Zambia, the change from 5% to 42% (both rounded) is 38 percentage points).

Copyright ©Data for Governance Alliance and Afrobarometer 2024

unease, the shift in focus from hunger and poverty to broader economic management may suggest some overall gains in economic conditions.

- Guineans (-22 points) and Kenyans (-16 points) are far less focused on food security compared to a decade ago.
- Mentions of poverty, meanwhile, have dropped by substantial margins in 16 countries, led by Botswana (-26 points), Senegal (-25), Lesotho (-24), and Mauritius (-20).

- Even as concerns about electricity supply have declined in priority in Cabo Verde (-25 points) and Zimbabwe (-14 points), they have spiked in South Africa (+19 points) as the country continues to struggle with frequent load shedding (Figure 20).

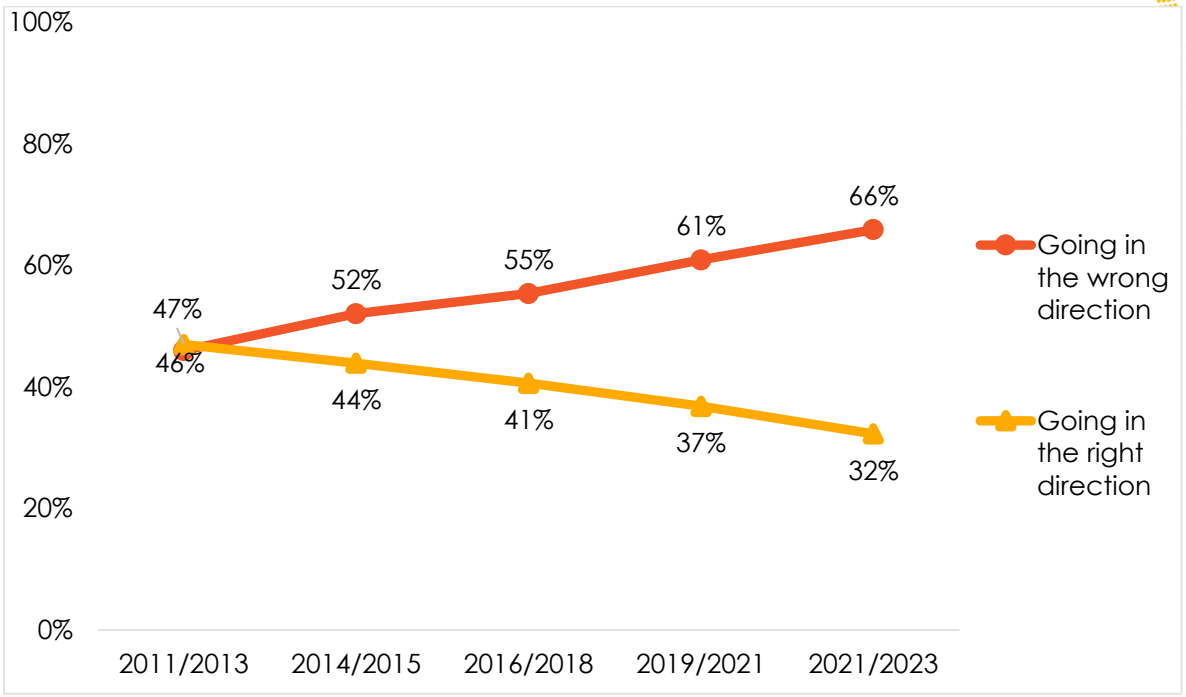
- Corruption has become a lower priority in Morocco (-13 points) and Nigeria (-13), whether because of progress in fighting it or displacement by other issues (Figure 20). But Kenyans' concern about corruption has surged, more than doubling (+18 points) to 35% over the past decade.

- Figure 21 shows over-time changes in citizens' priorities for 36 of the 39 countries included in Round 9. The other three countries were surveyed for the first time in Round 9, so only the current results are shown.

Copyright ©Data for Governance Alliance and Afrobarometer 2024

Charts

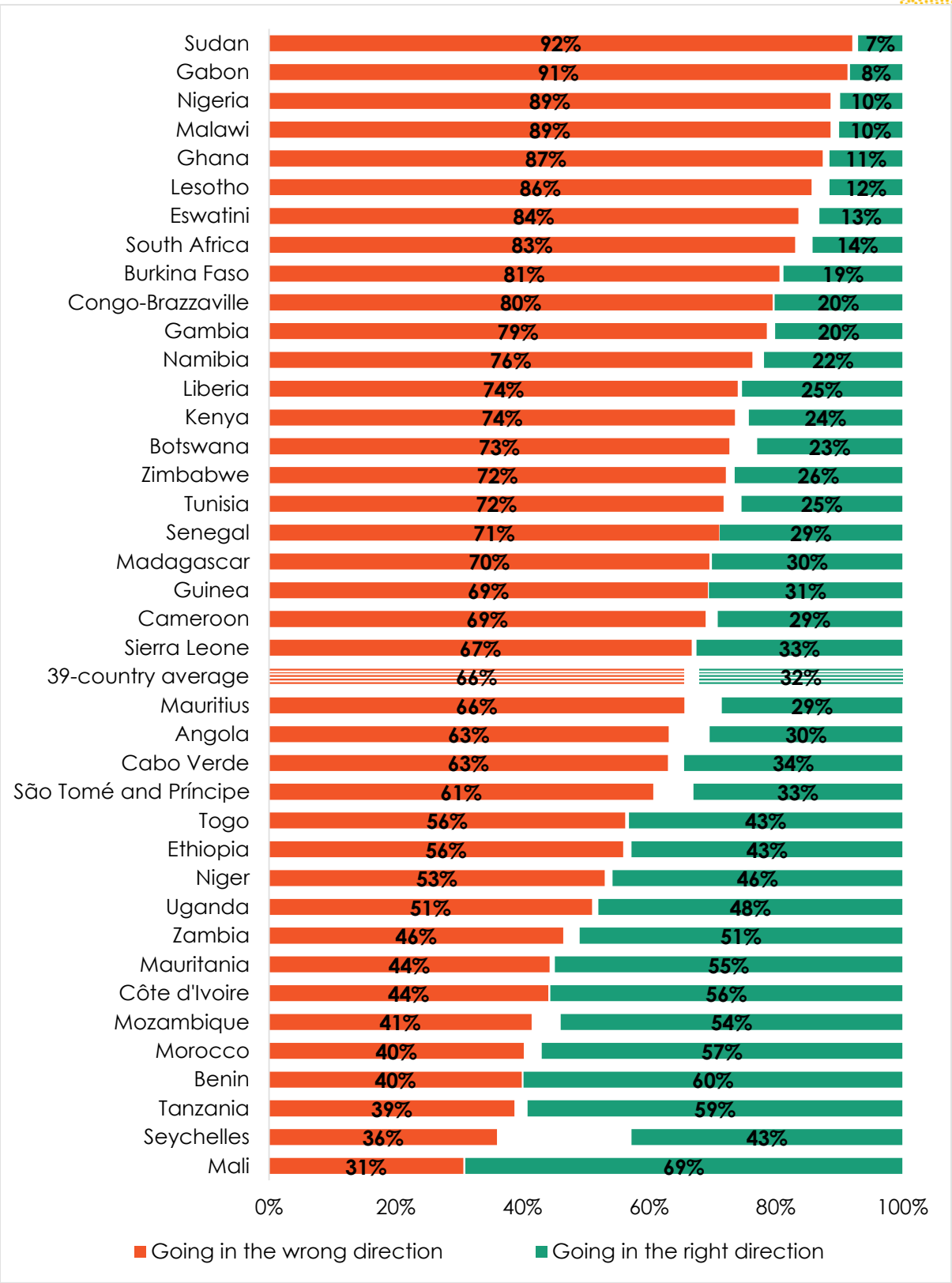
Figure 1: Overall direction of the country | 30 countries | 2011-2023



Respondents were asked: *Let's start with your general view about the current direction of our country. Some people might think the country is going in the wrong direction. Others may feel it is going in the right direction. So let me ask you about the overall direction of the country: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?*

Copyright ©Data for Governance Alliance and Afrobarometer 2024

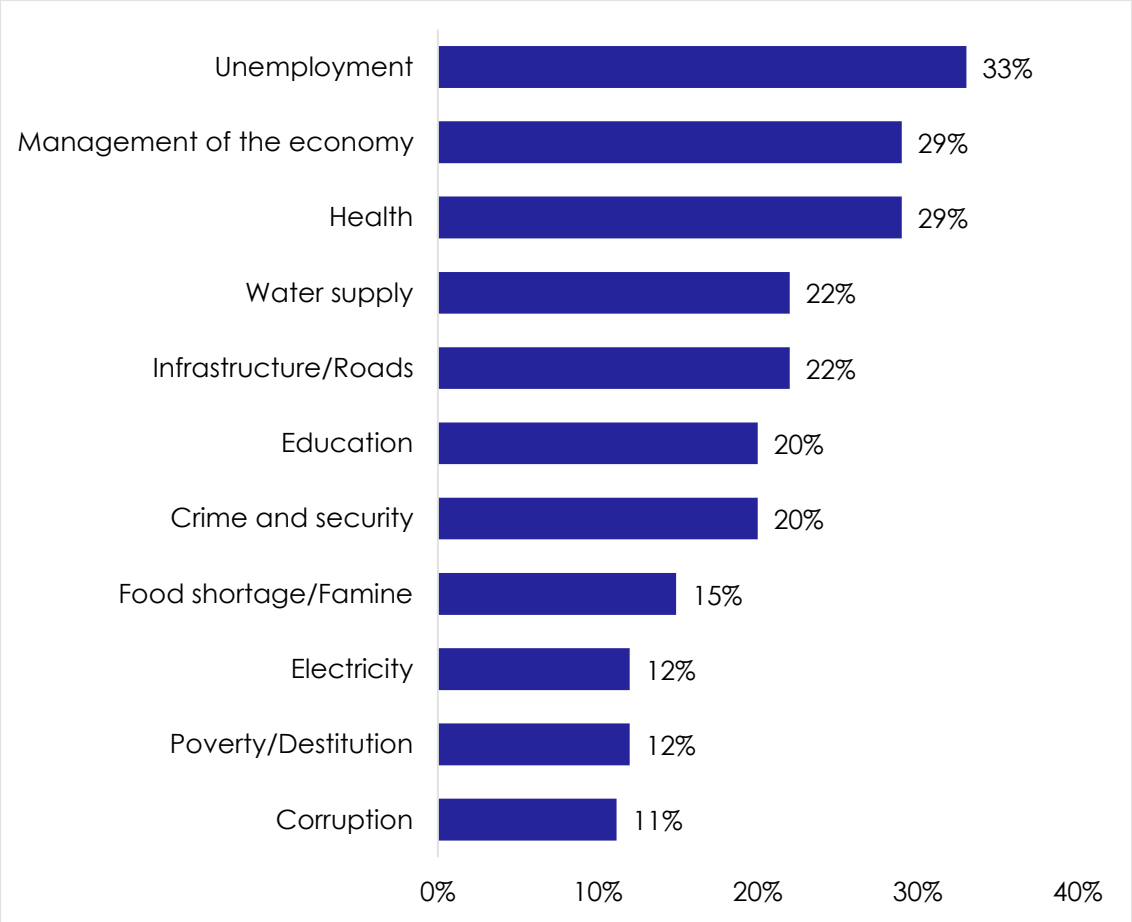
Figure 2: Overall direction of the country | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: *Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?*

Copyright ©Data for Governance Alliance and Afrobarometer 2024

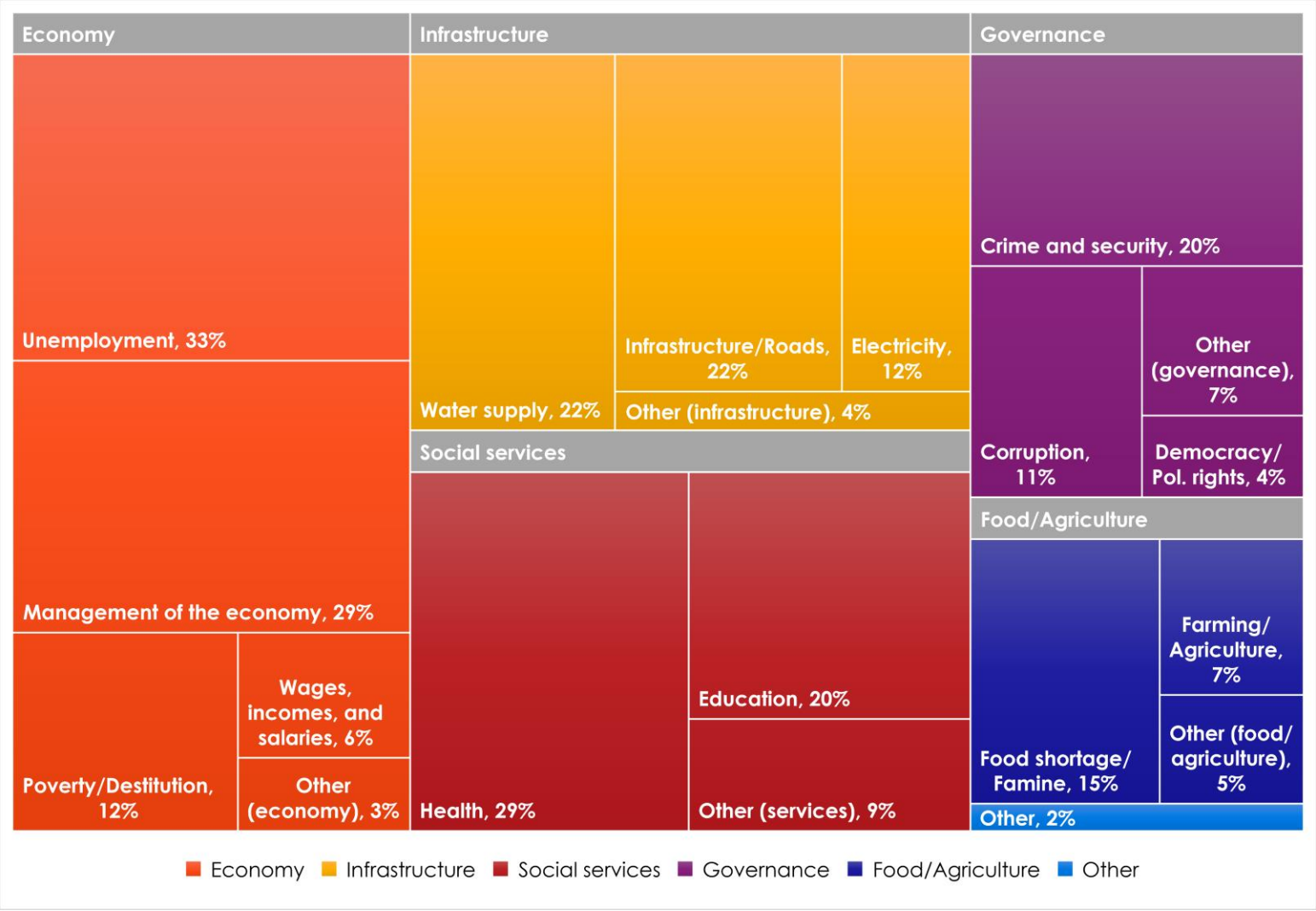
Figure 3: Most important problems | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Note: Respondents could give up to three responses. Figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem as one of their top three priorities, for all problems cited by at least 10% of respondents.)*

Copyright ©Data for Governance Alliance and Afrobarometer 2024

Figure 4: Most important problems, by category | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

Figure 5: Most important problems | by poverty level | 39 countries | 2021/2023

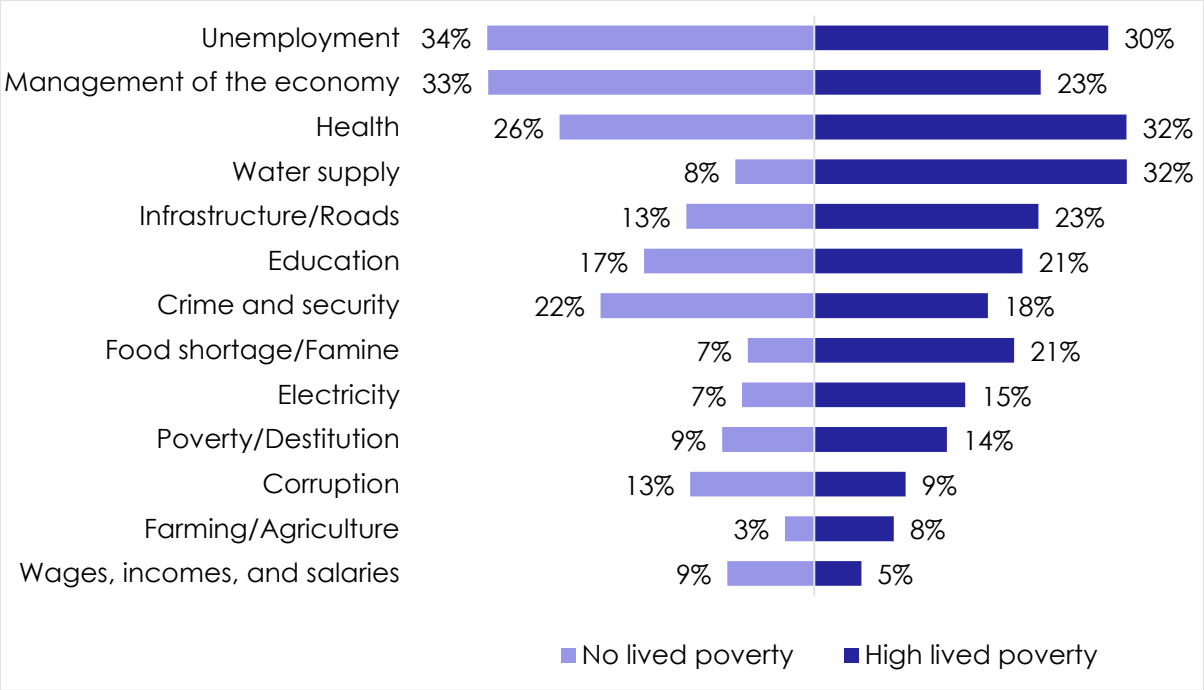
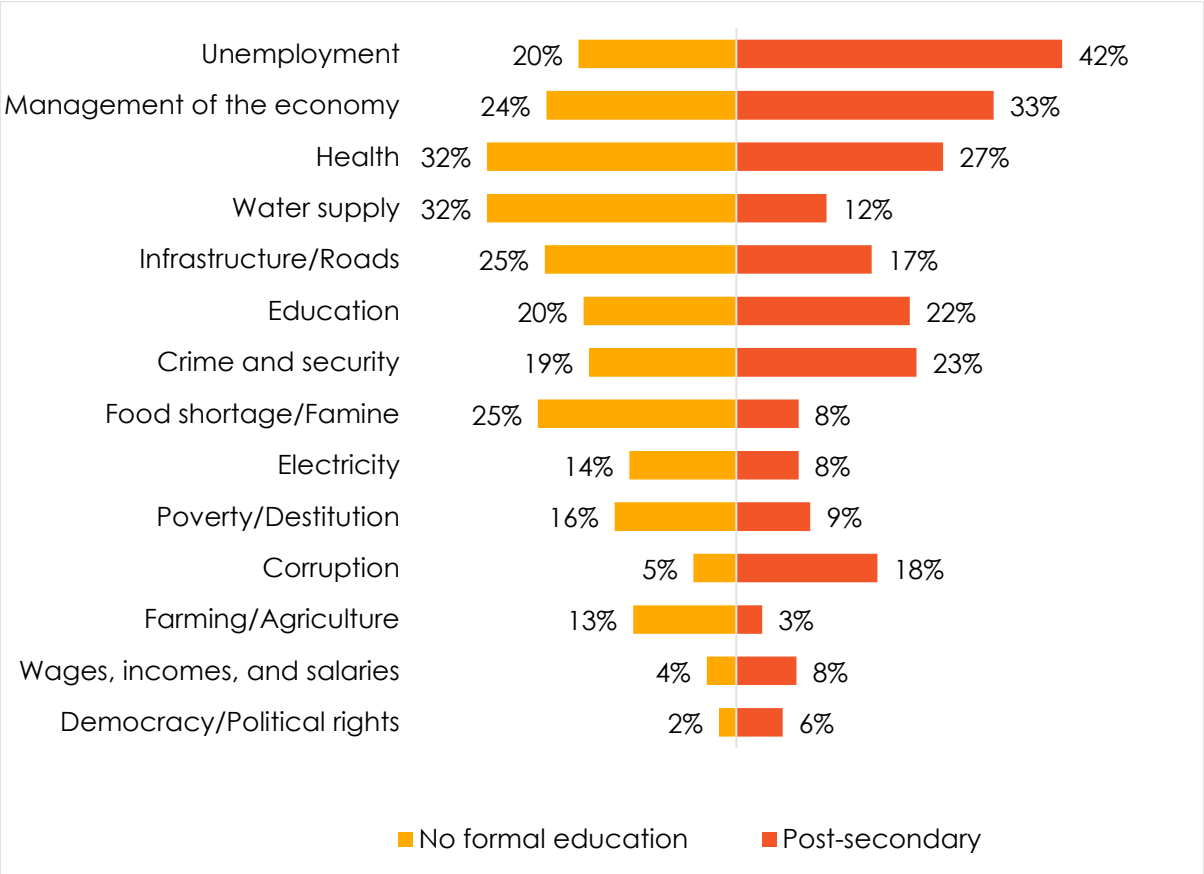


Figure 6: Most important problems | by educational level | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

Figure 7: Most important problems | by urban-rural residency | 39 countries | 2021/2023

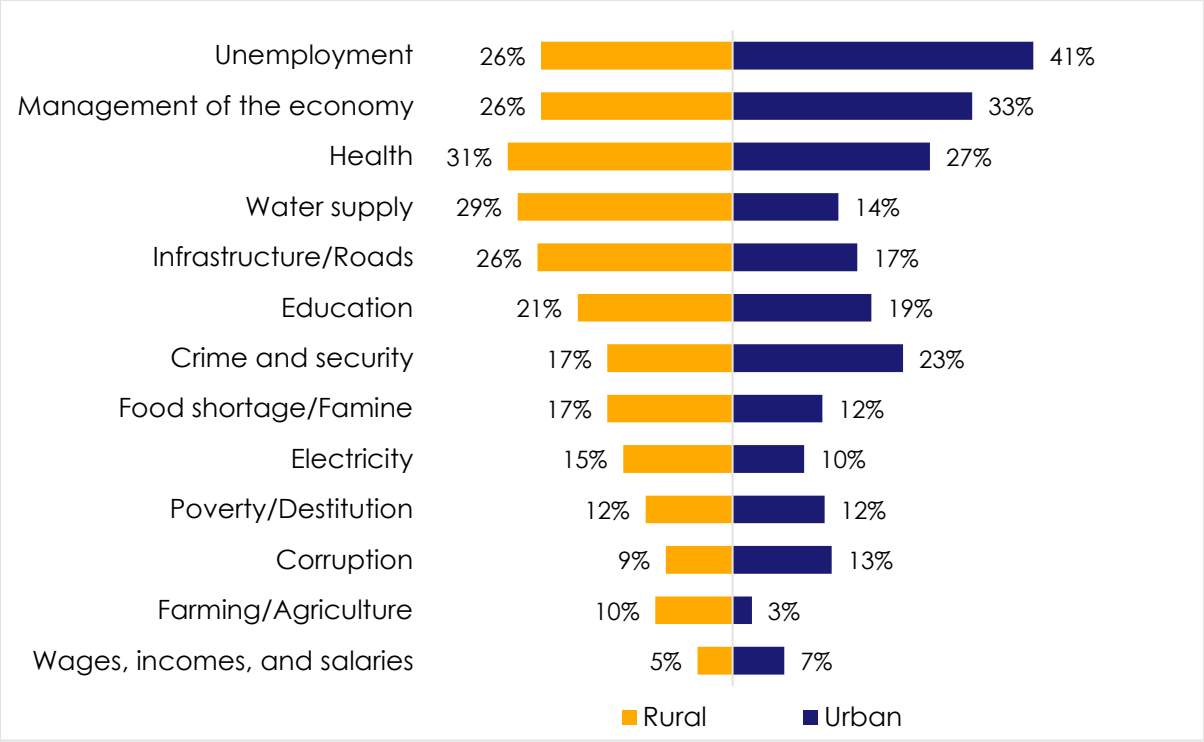
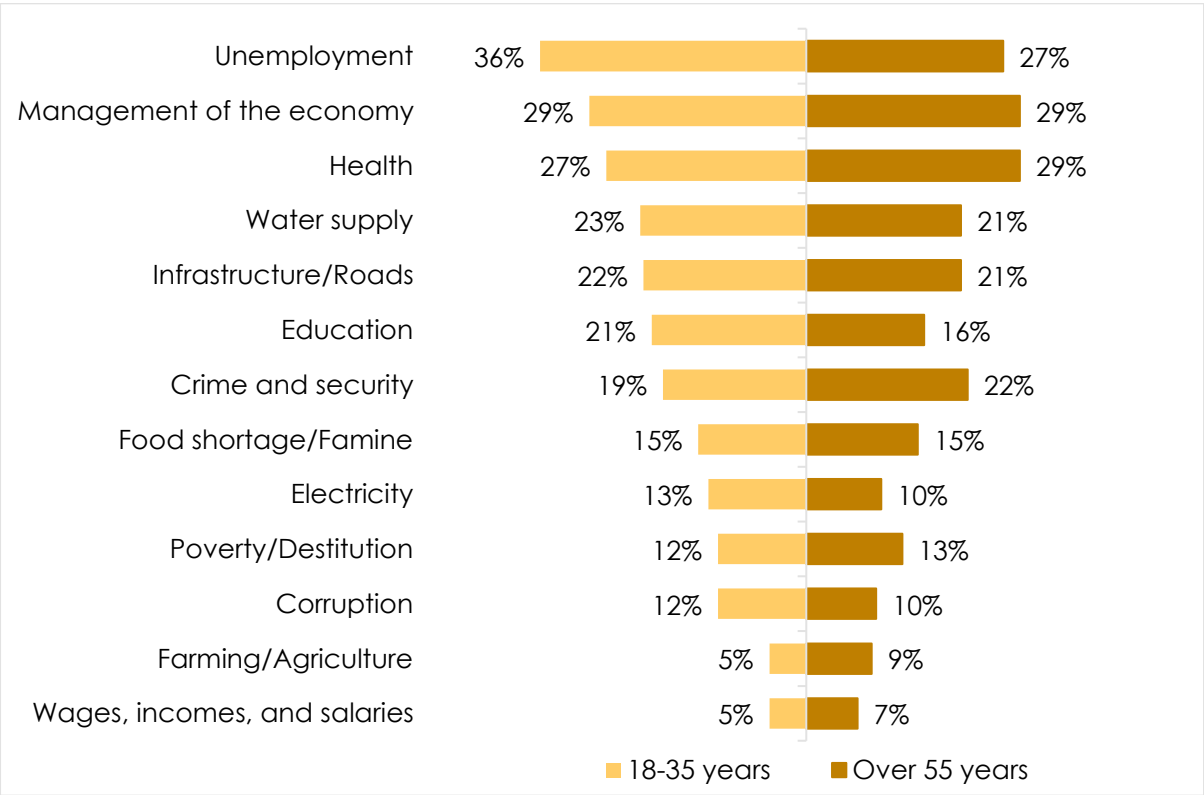
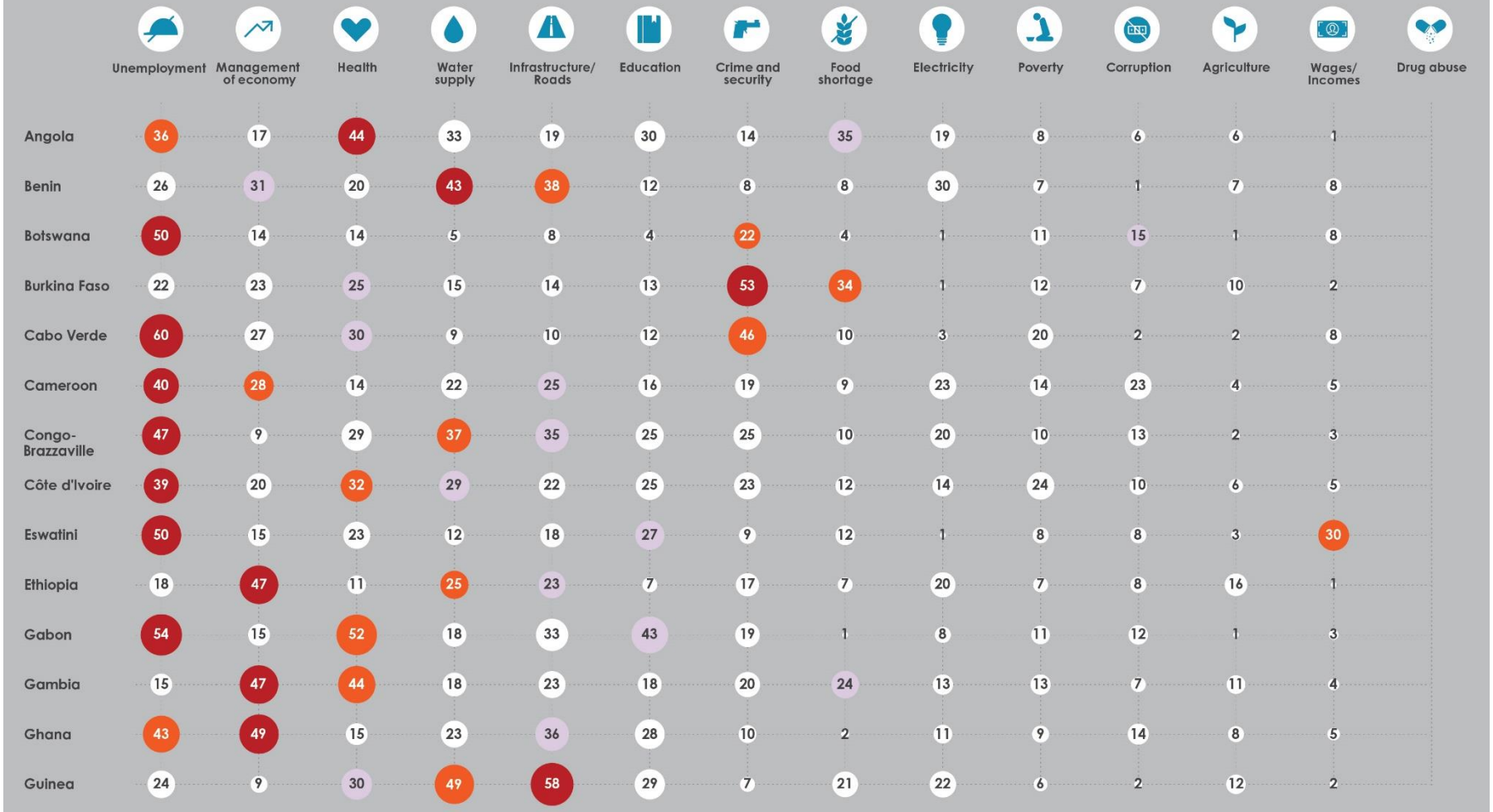


Figure 8: Most important problems | by age | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

Most important problems, by country | 39 African countries | 2021/2023



Key

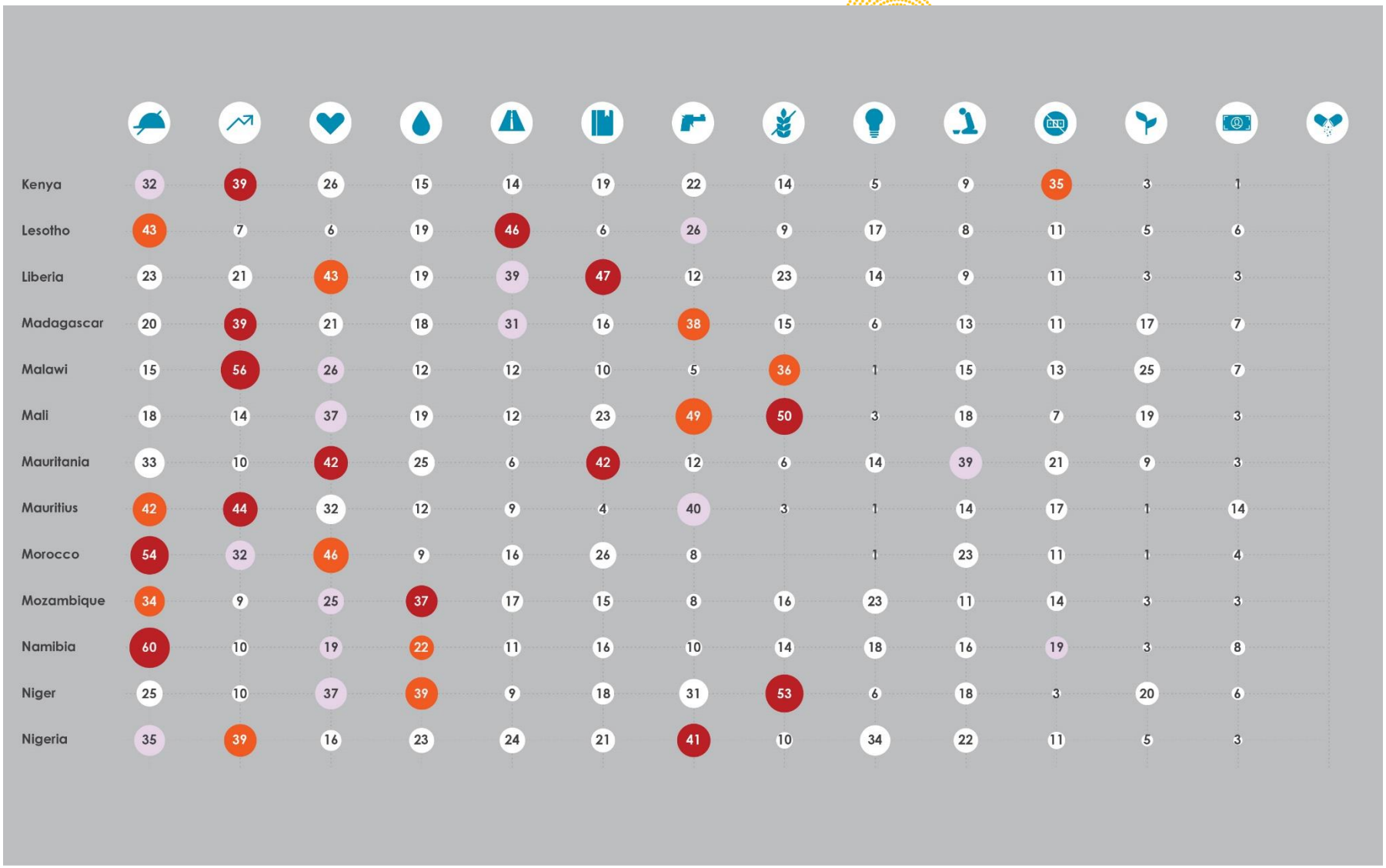
% of all respondents

1st 2nd 3rd

ranking in the country

AFRO BAROMETER
Let the people have a say

Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024



Key

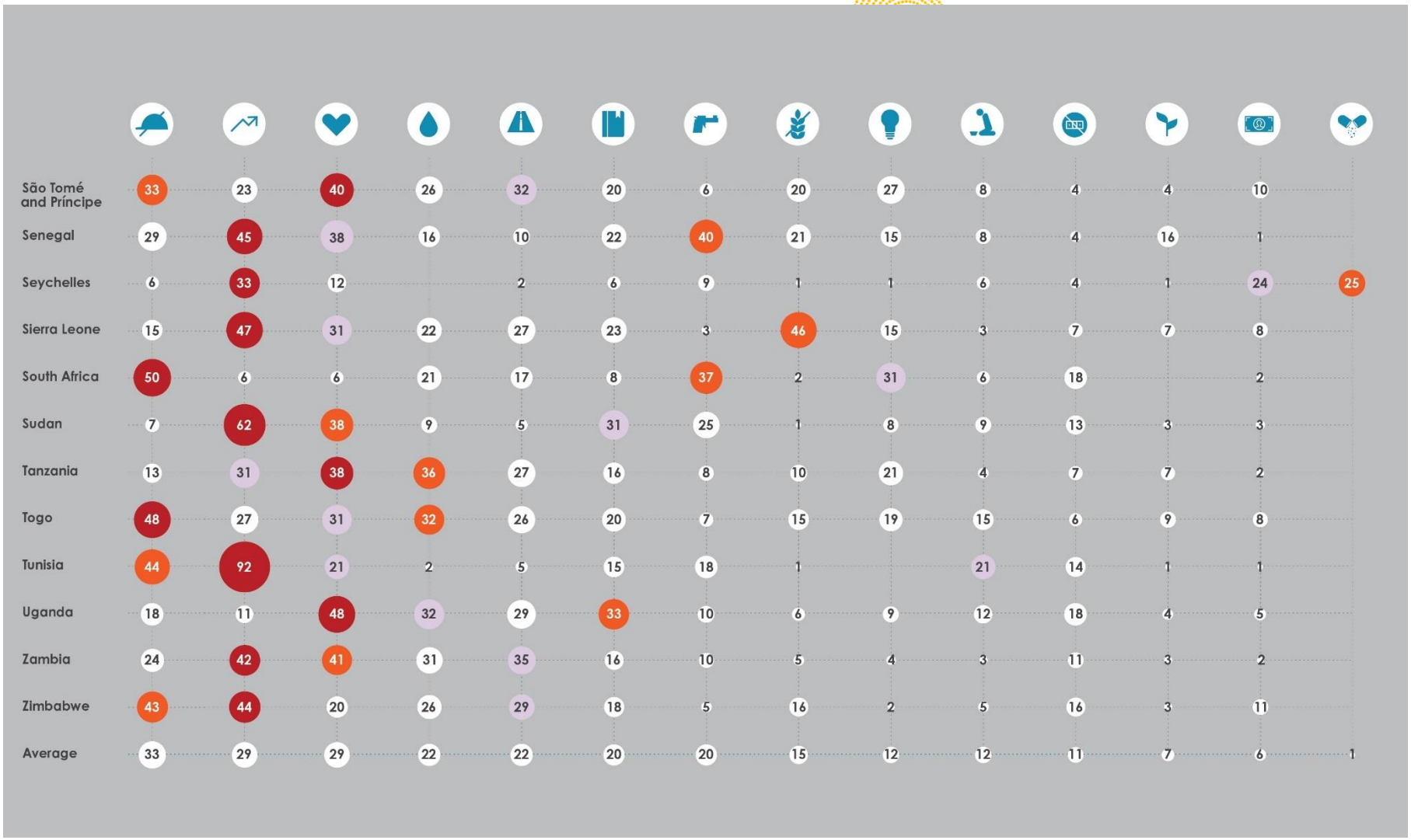
% of all respondents

1st 2nd 3rd

ranking in the country

AFRO BAROMETER
Let the people have a say

Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024



Key

% of all respondents

1st 2nd 3rd

ranking in the country

Respondents were asked
In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address?

Note Respondents could give up to three responses. Figure shows % of respondents who identify each issue as one of their country's three most important problems.

AFRO BAROMETER
Let the people have a say

Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

Figure 9: Unemployment as most important problem | countries ≥ 20% | 2021/2023

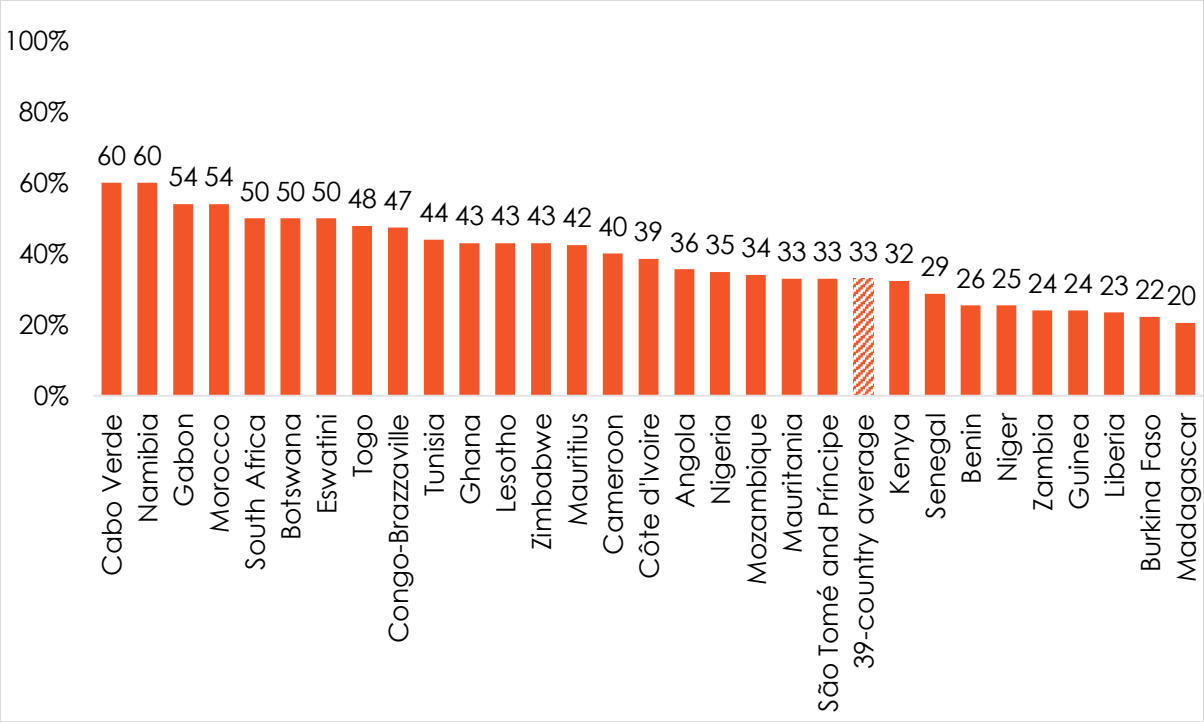


Figure 10: Economic management as most important problem | countries ≥ 20% | 2021/2023

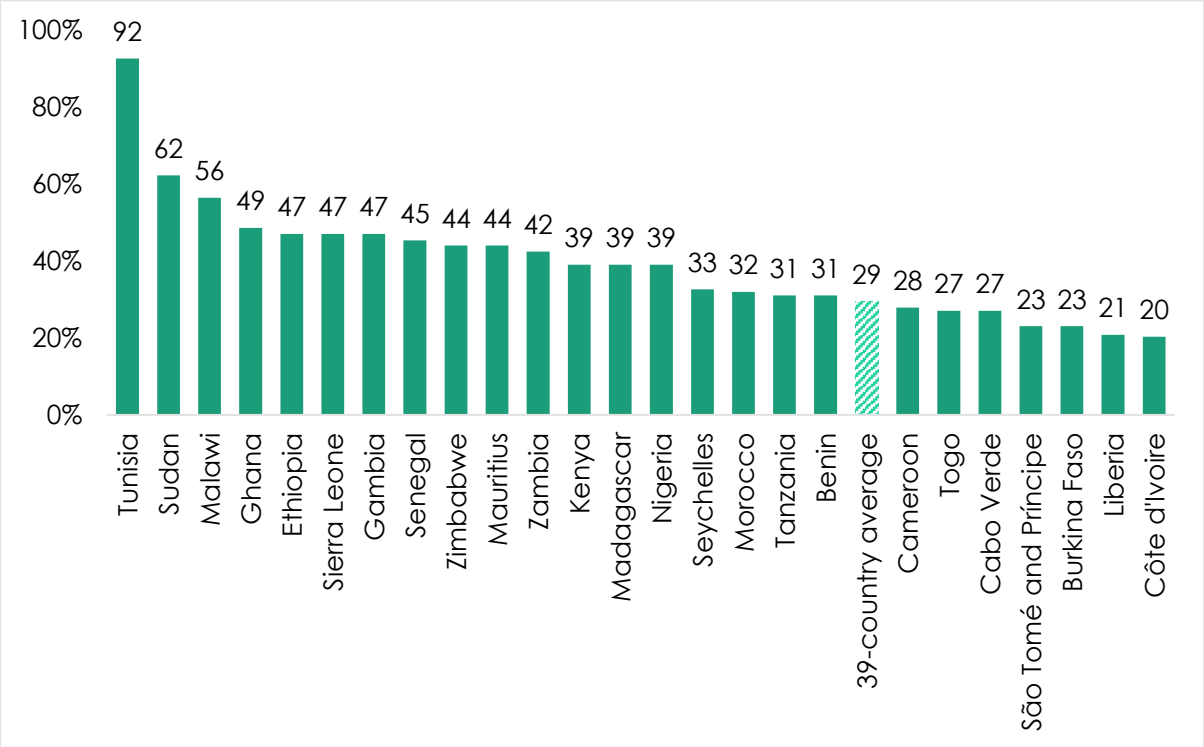


Figure 11: Health as most important problem | countries ≥ 20% | 2021/2023

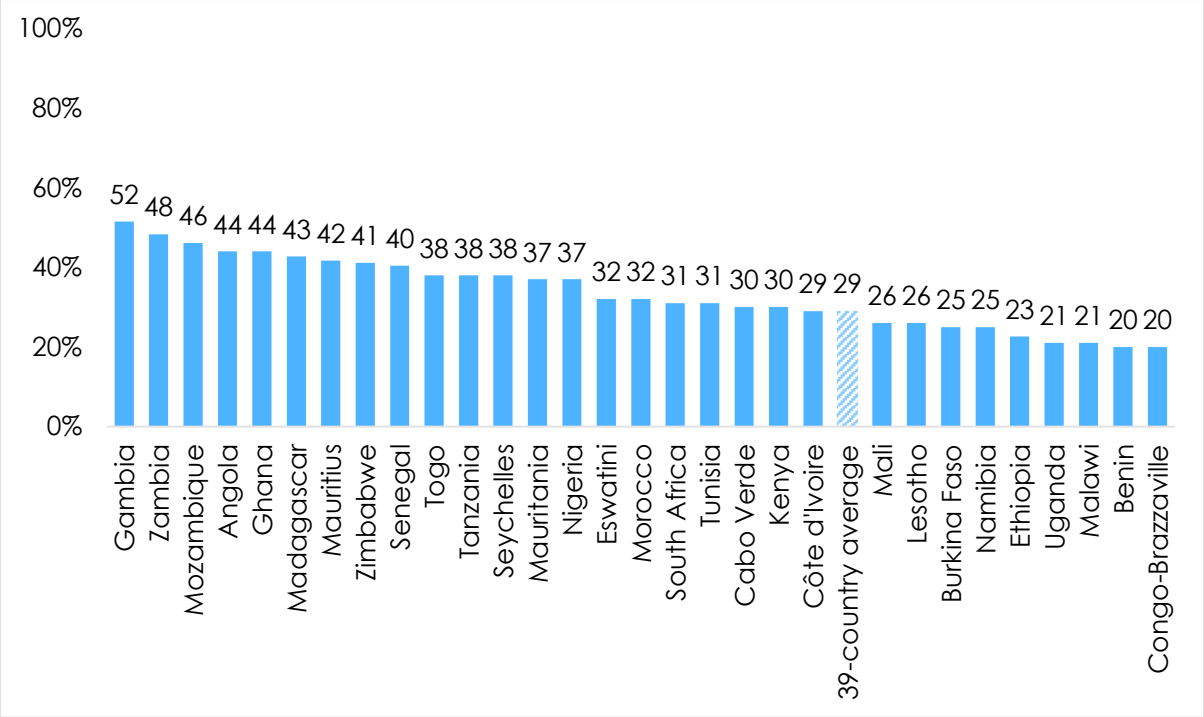


Figure 12: Water as most important problem | countries ≥ 20% | 2021/2023

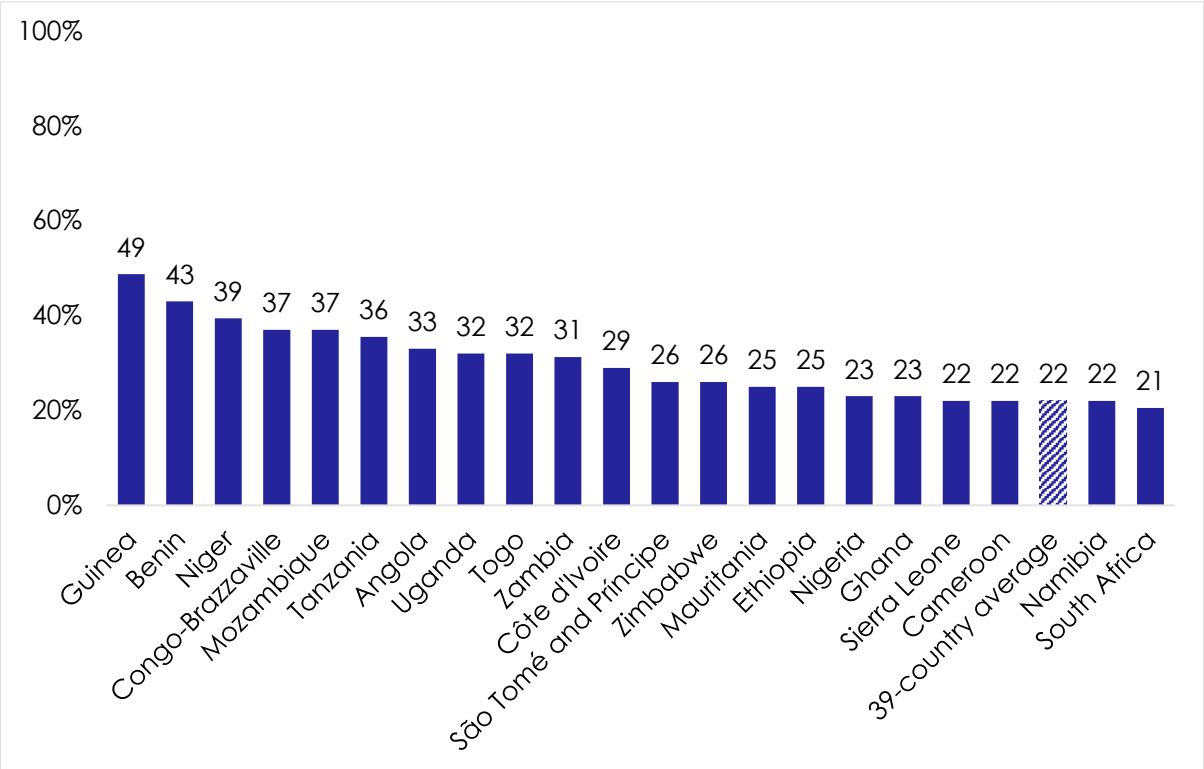


Figure 13: Infrastructure/Roads as most important problem | countries ≥ 20% | 2021/2023

Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

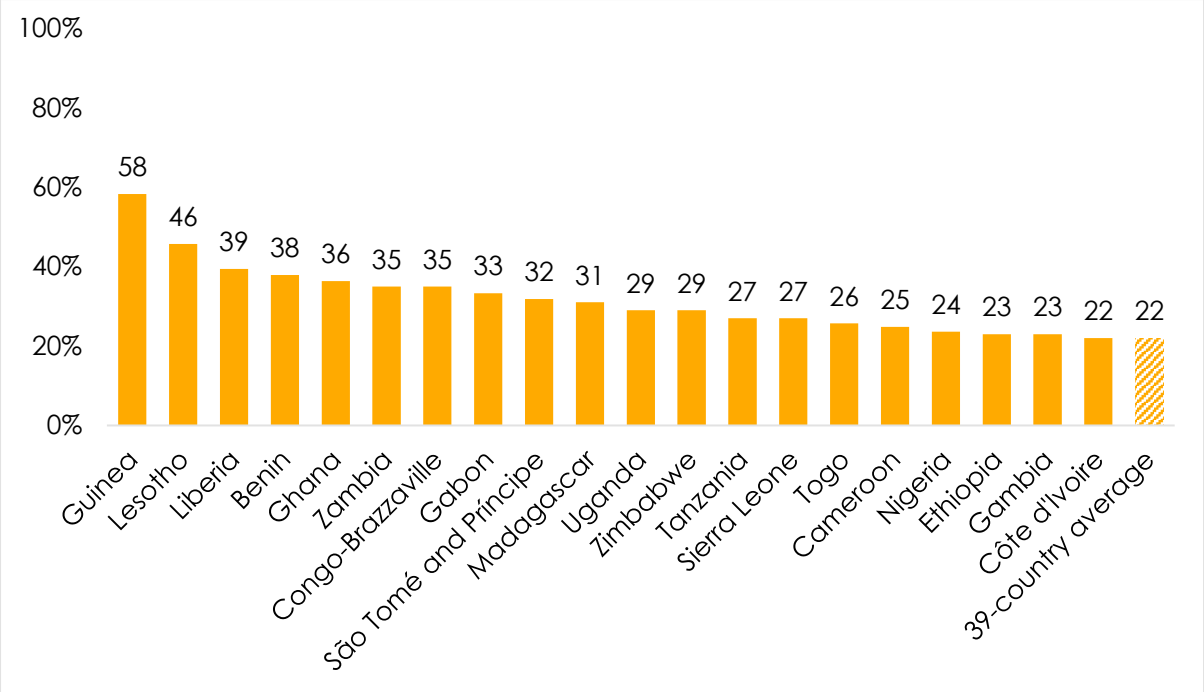
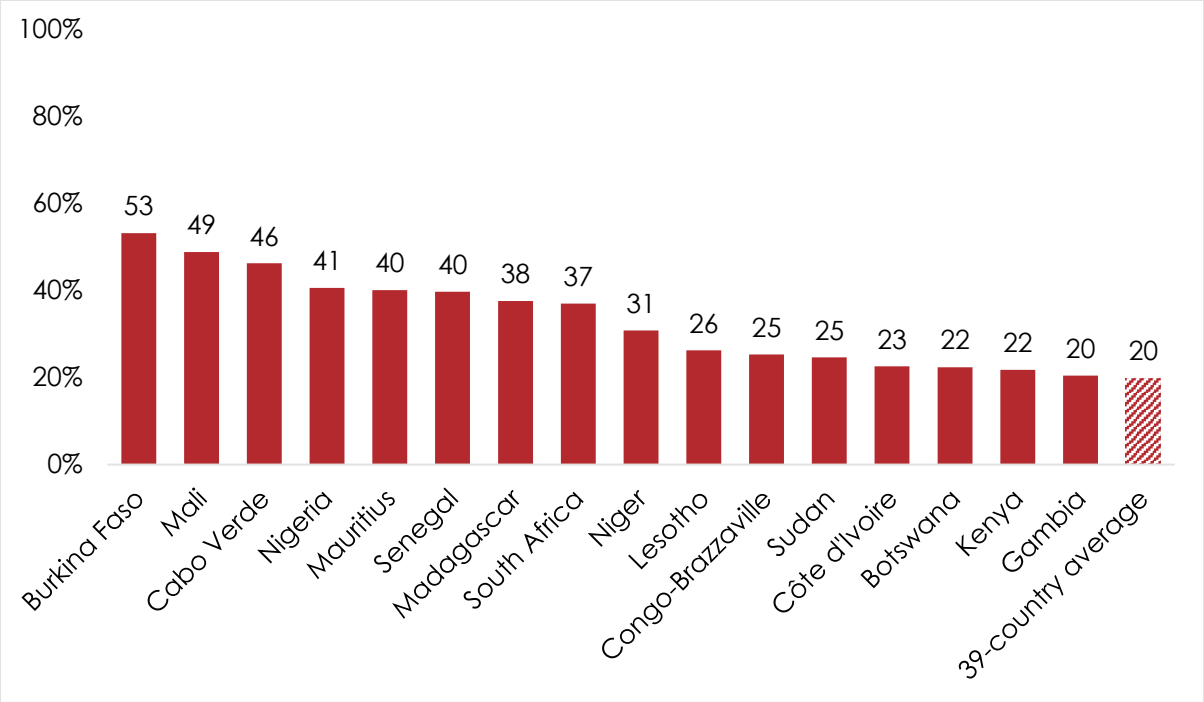


Figure 14: Education as most important problem | countries ≥ 20% | 2021/2023

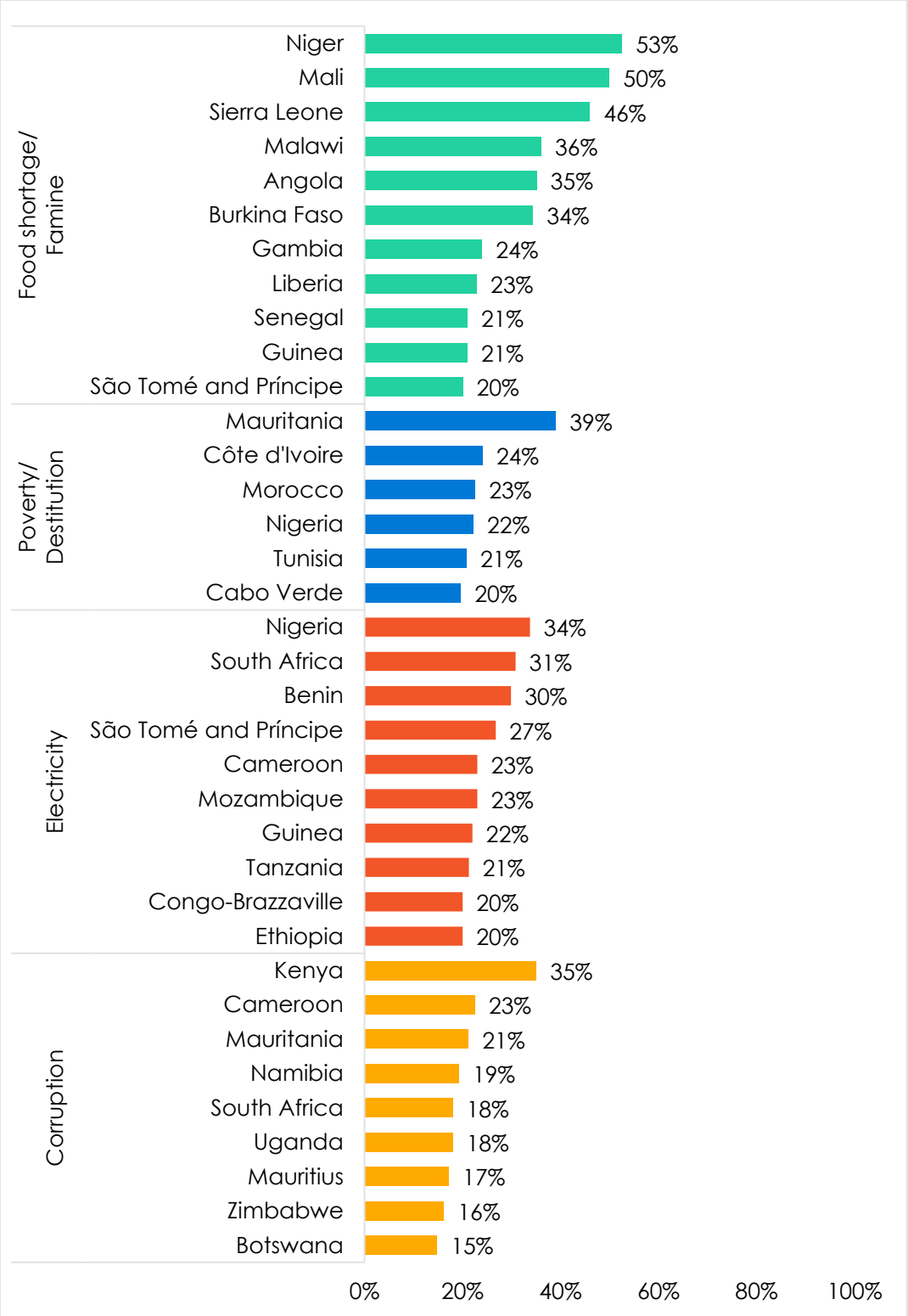
Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

Figure 15: Crime and security as most important problem | countries ≥ 20% | 2021/2023



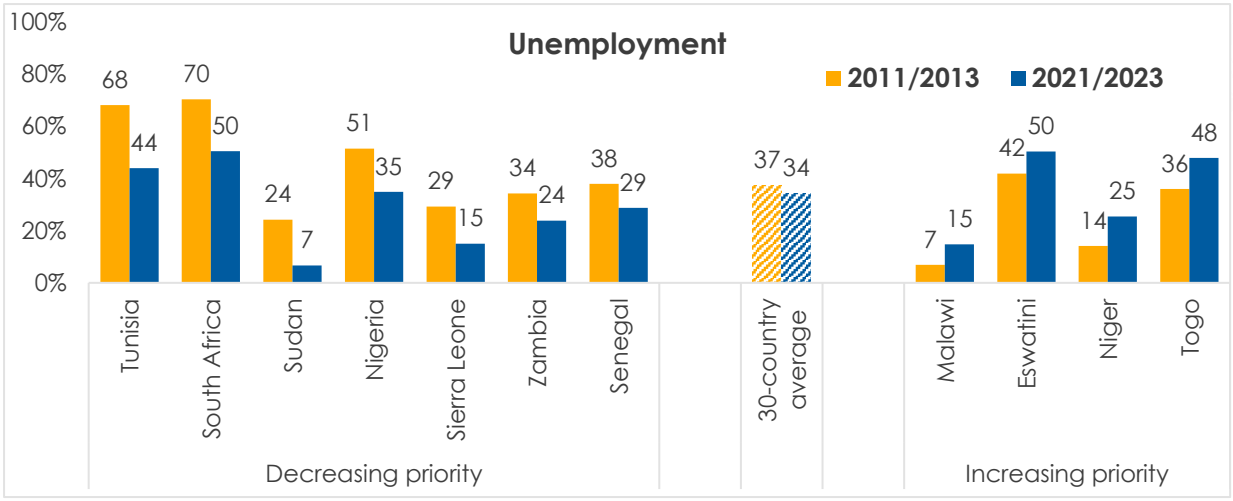
Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

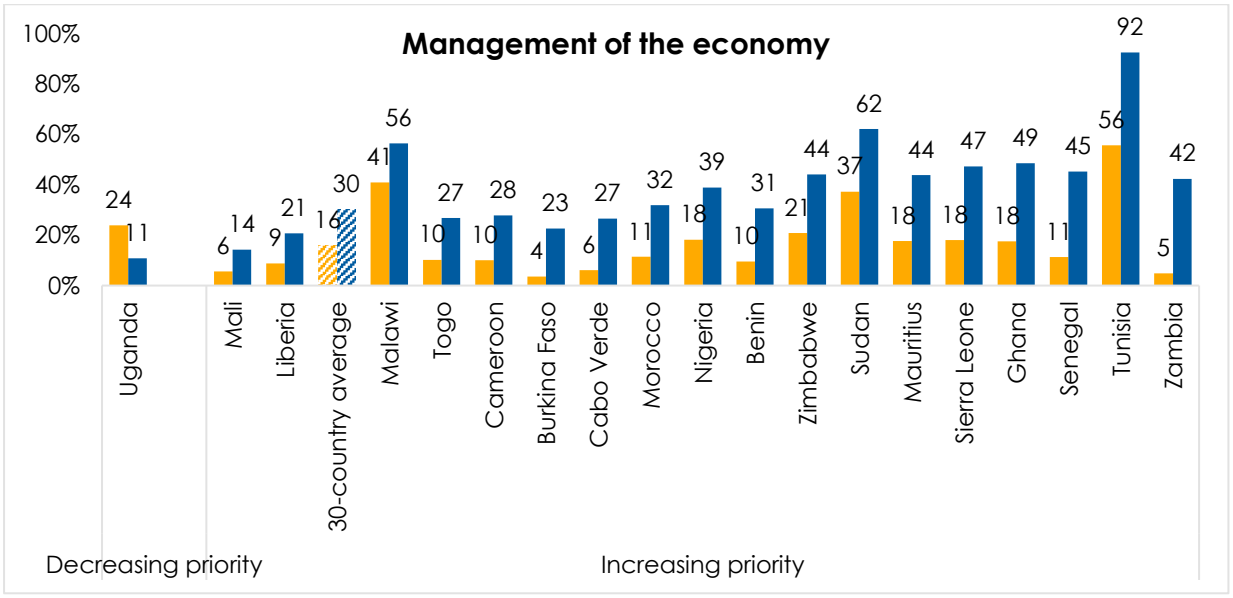
Figure 16: Food shortage, poverty, electricity, and corruption as most important problems | countries ≥ 20% | 2021/2023

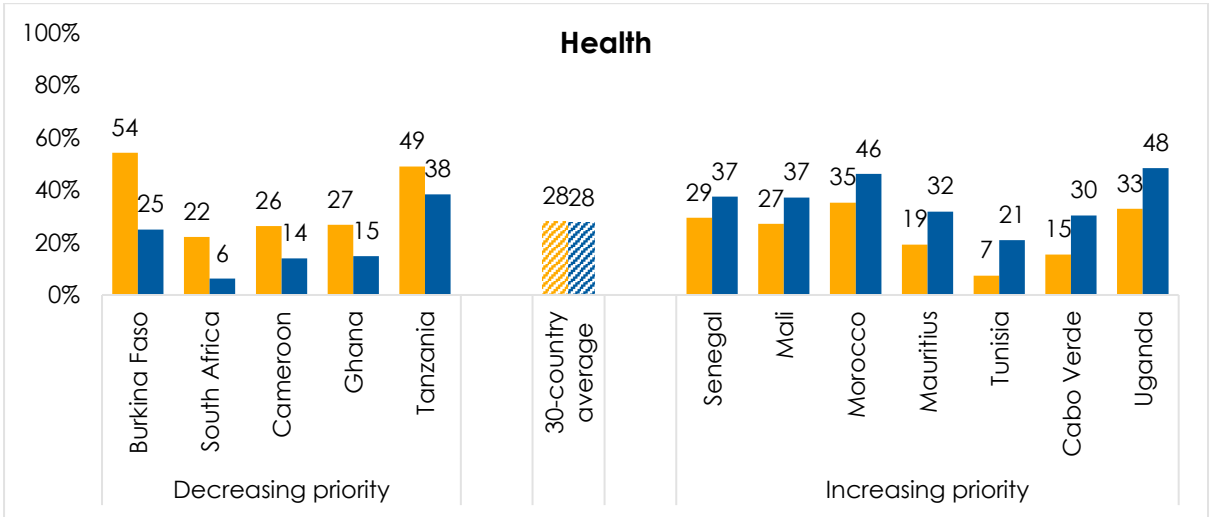


Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

Figure 17: Changing priorities | increase/decrease of 8 points or more | 2011-2023







Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

Figure 18: Changing priorities | increase/decrease of 8 points or more | 2011-2023

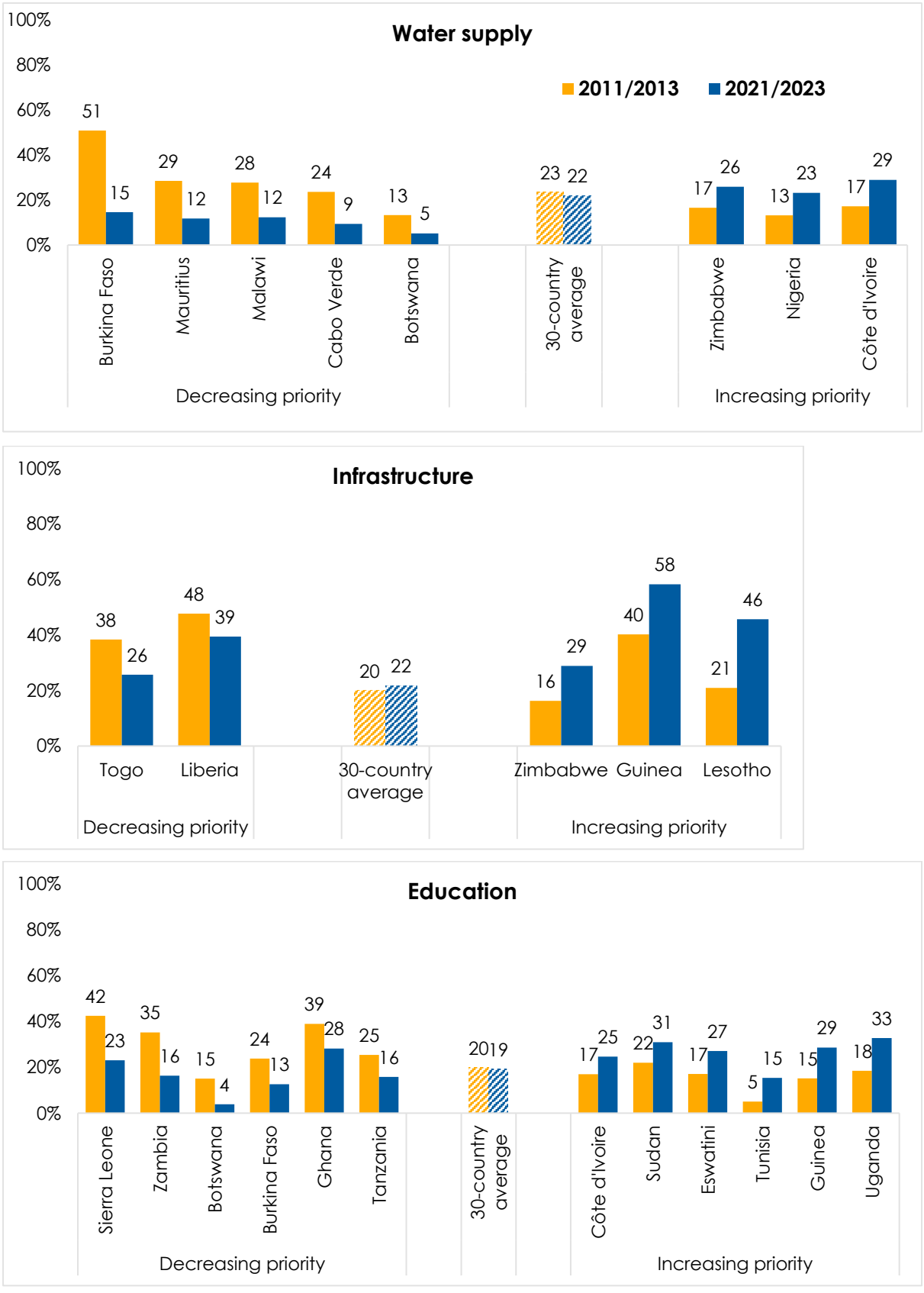


Figure 19: Changing priorities | increase/decrease of 8 points or more | 2011-2023

Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

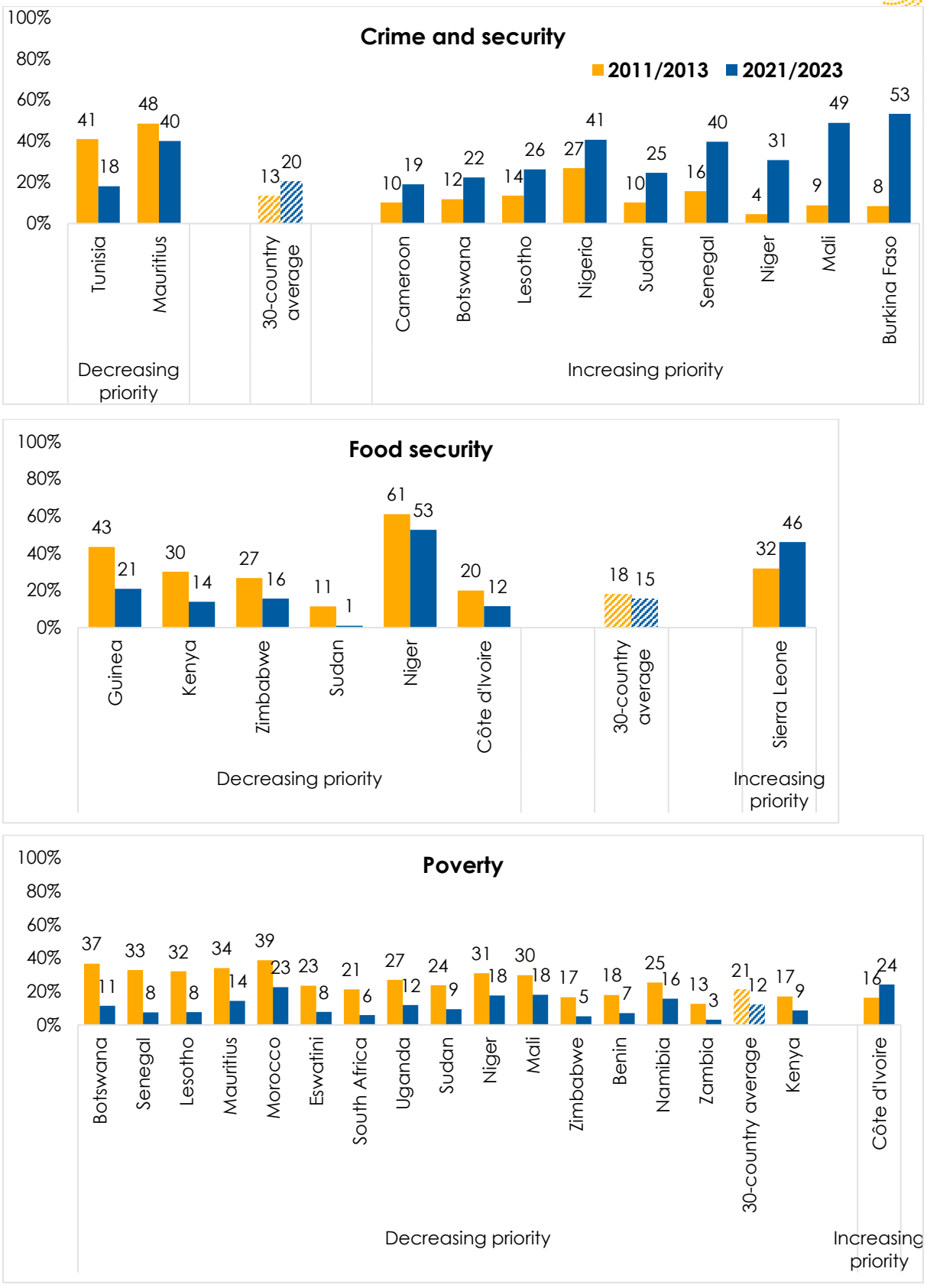
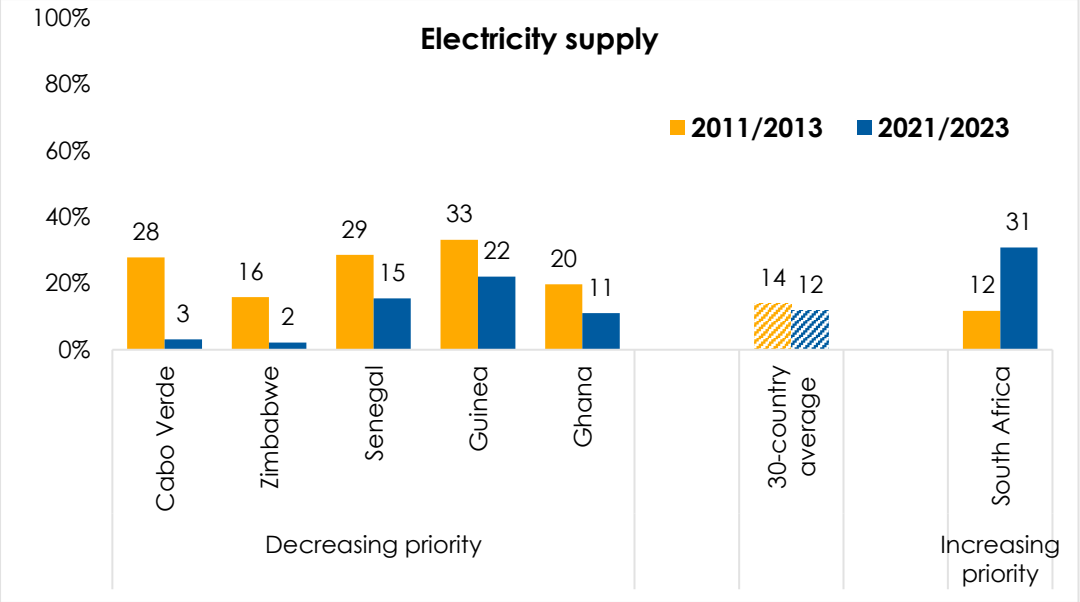
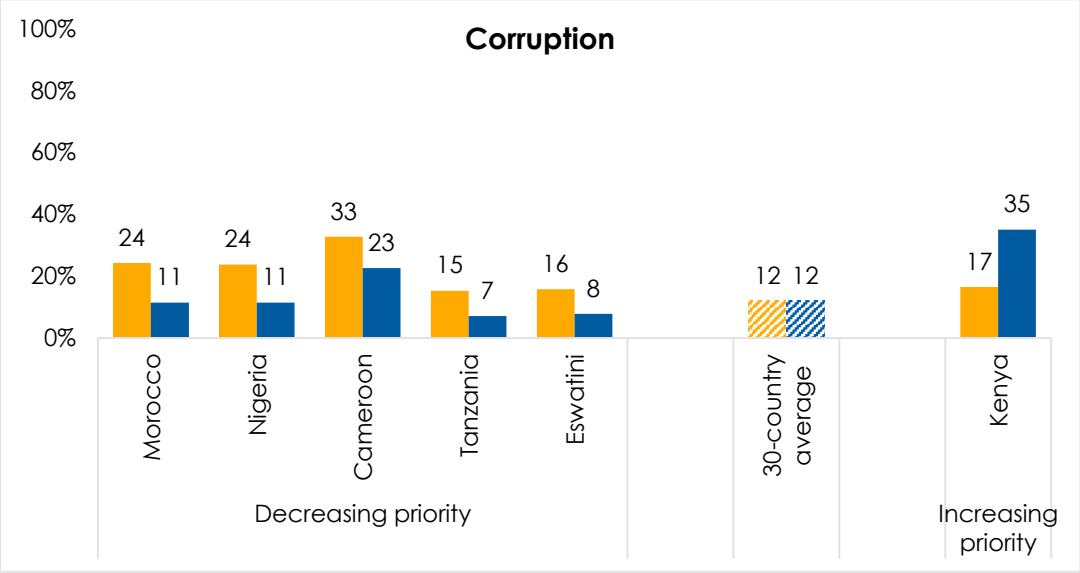


Figure 20: Changing priorities | increase/decrease of 8 points or more | 2011-2023

Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

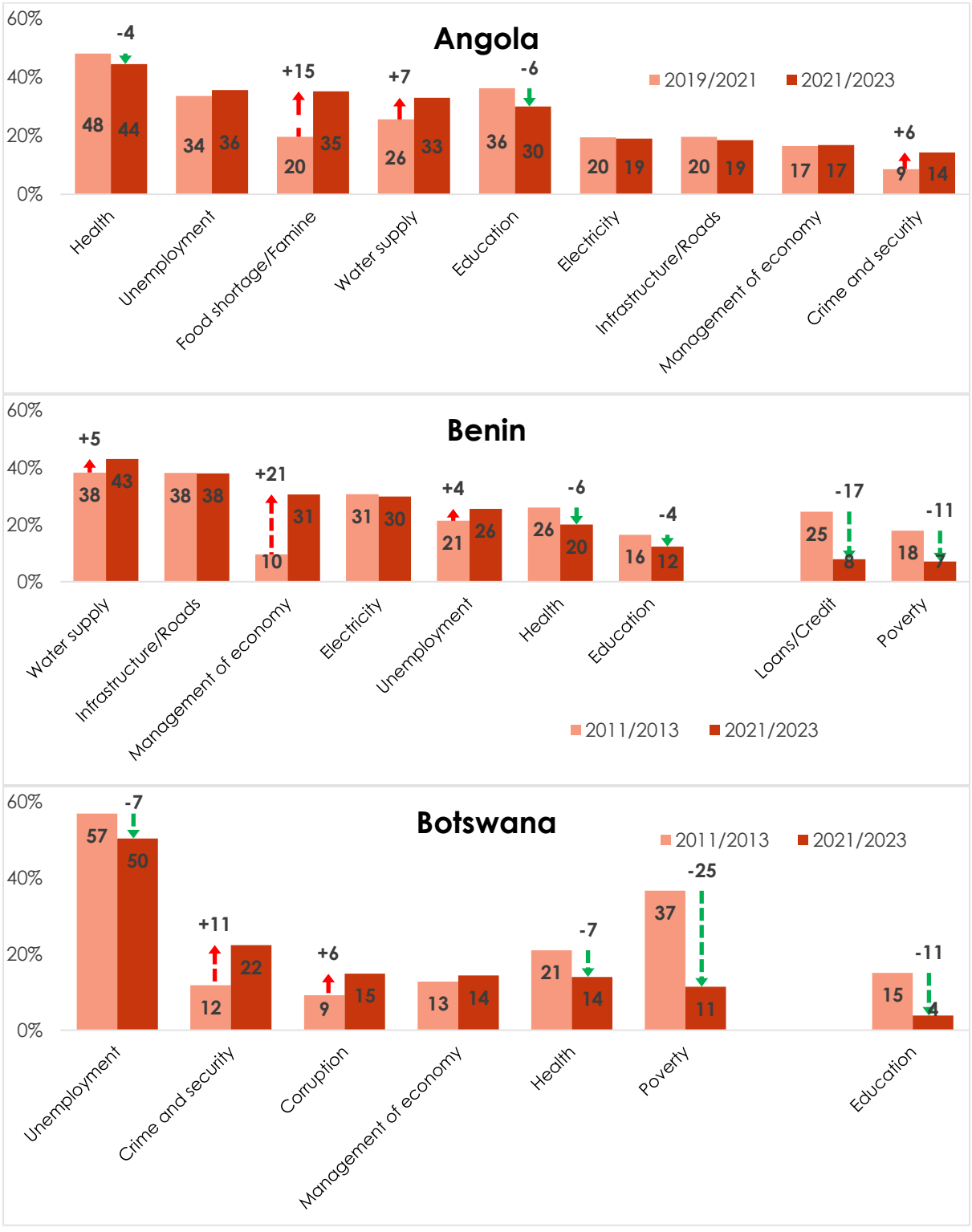




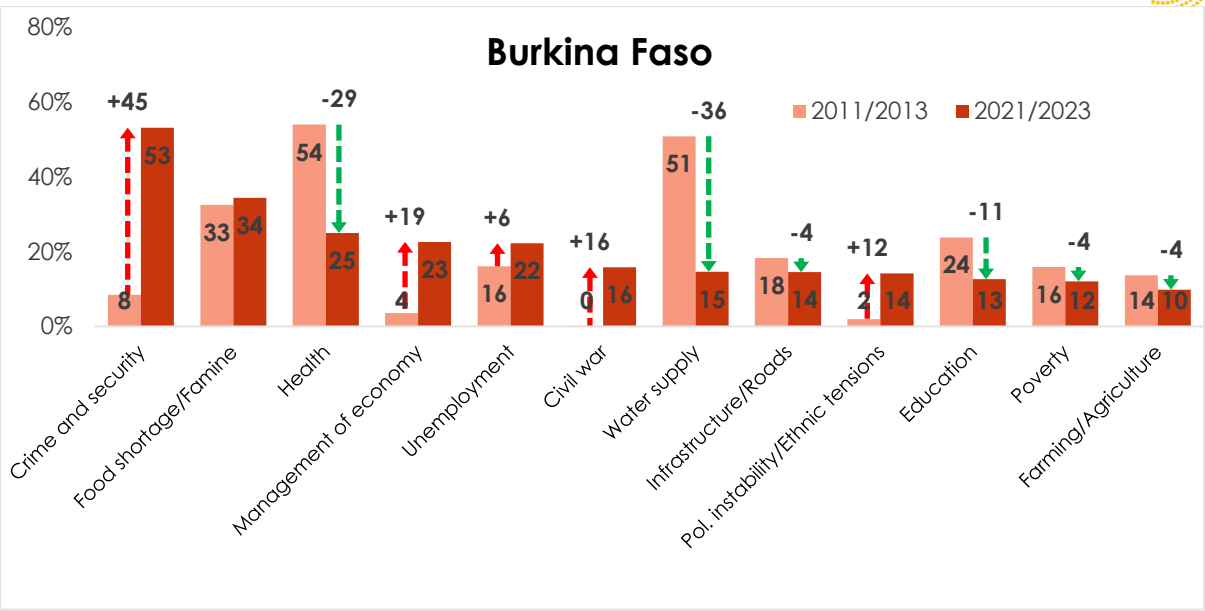
Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

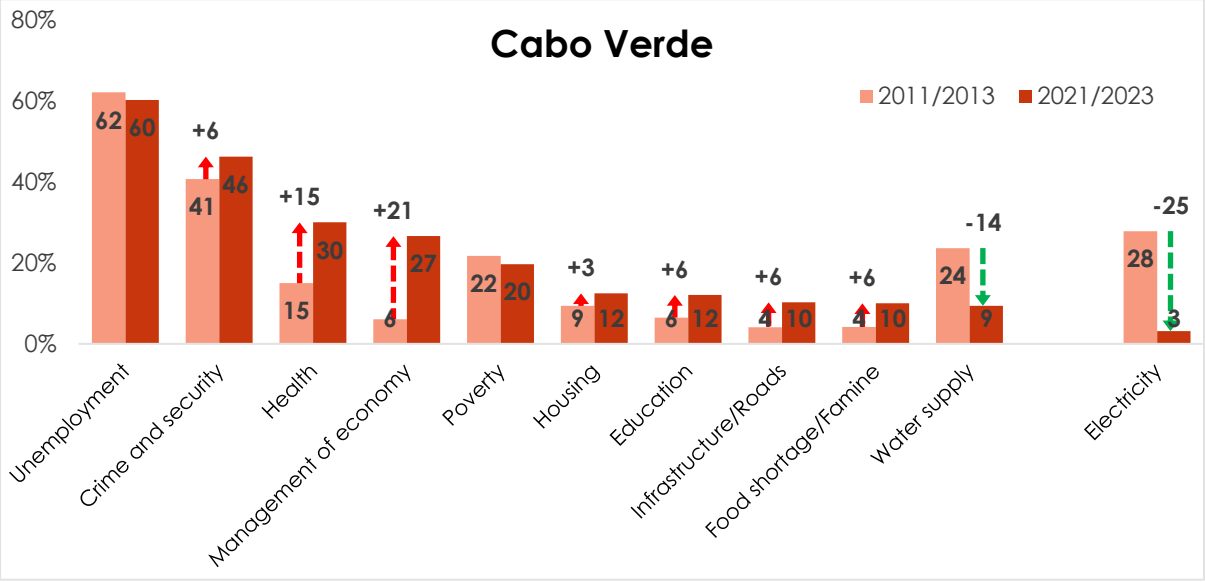
Figure 21: Most important problems and changing priorities, by country | 2011-2023

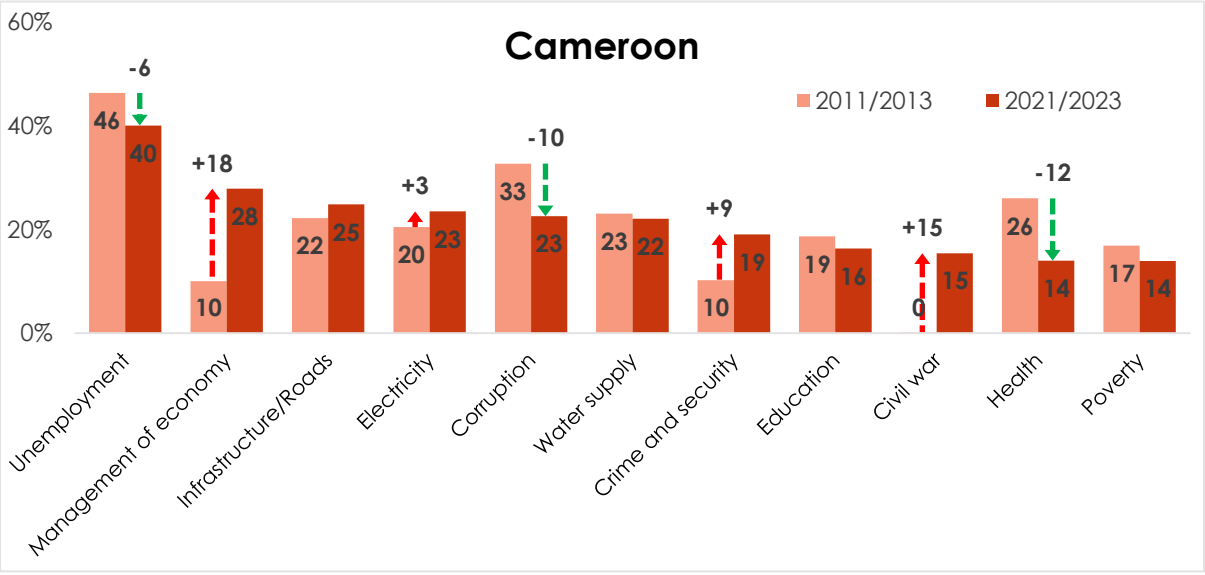
The charts that follow show all issues that were cited by 10% or more of respondents in Round 9 (2021/2023) or that changed (increased or decreased) by more than 10 percentage points compared to Round 5 (2011/2013) or to the first round in which the country was included (for countries added since Round 5).



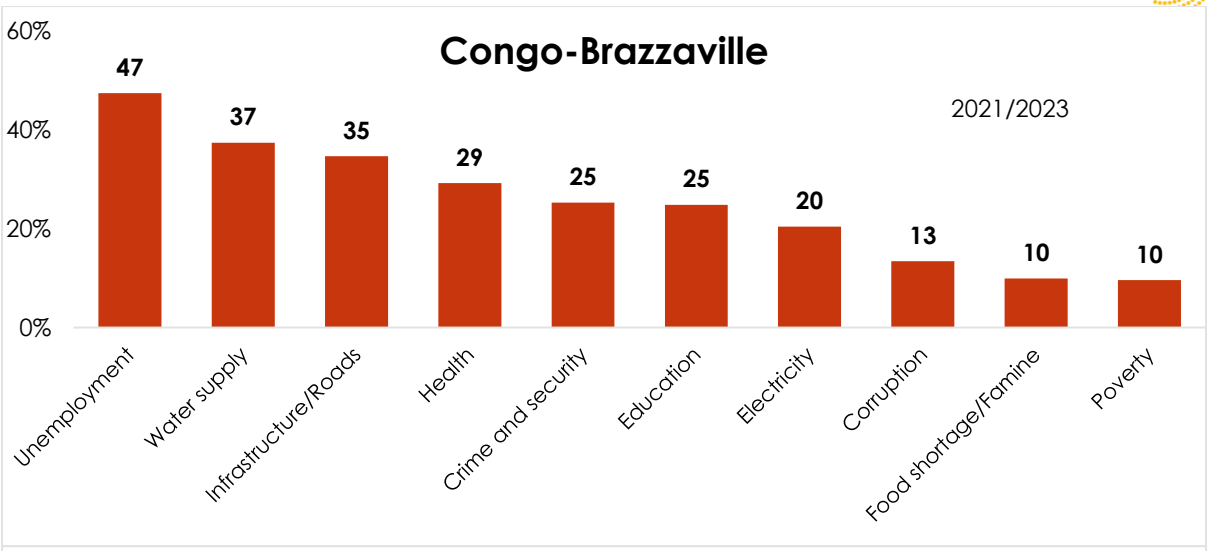
Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

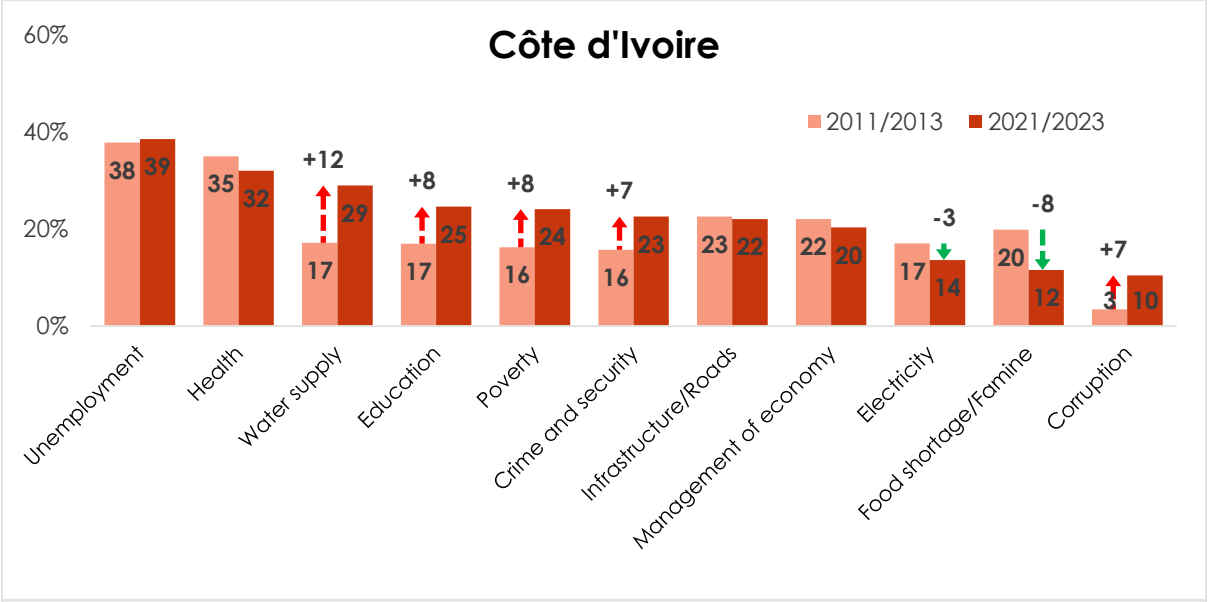


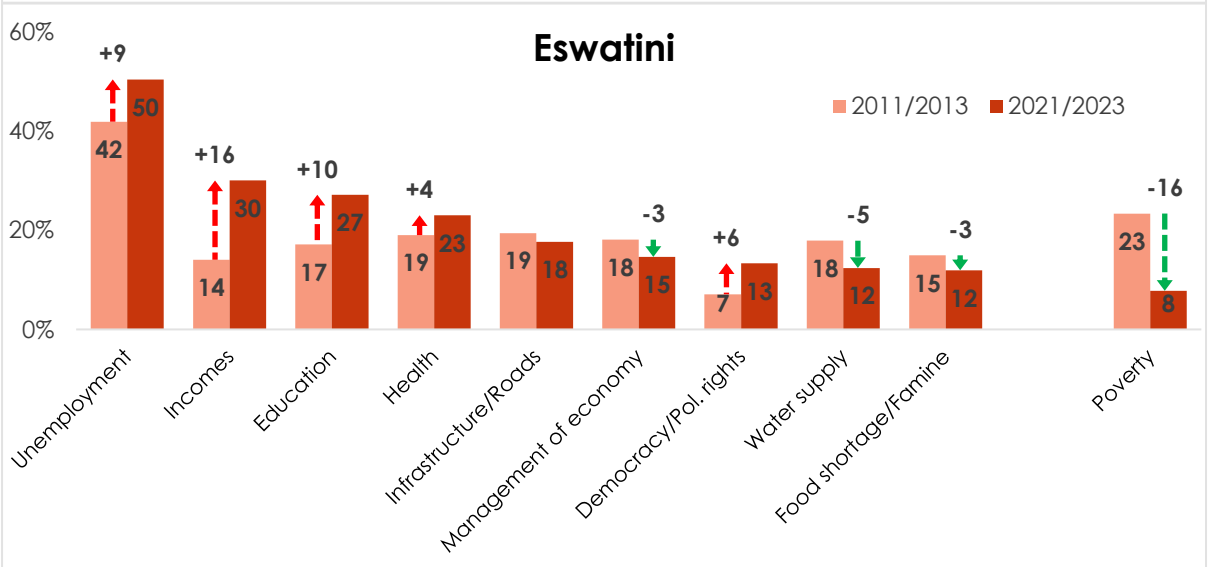


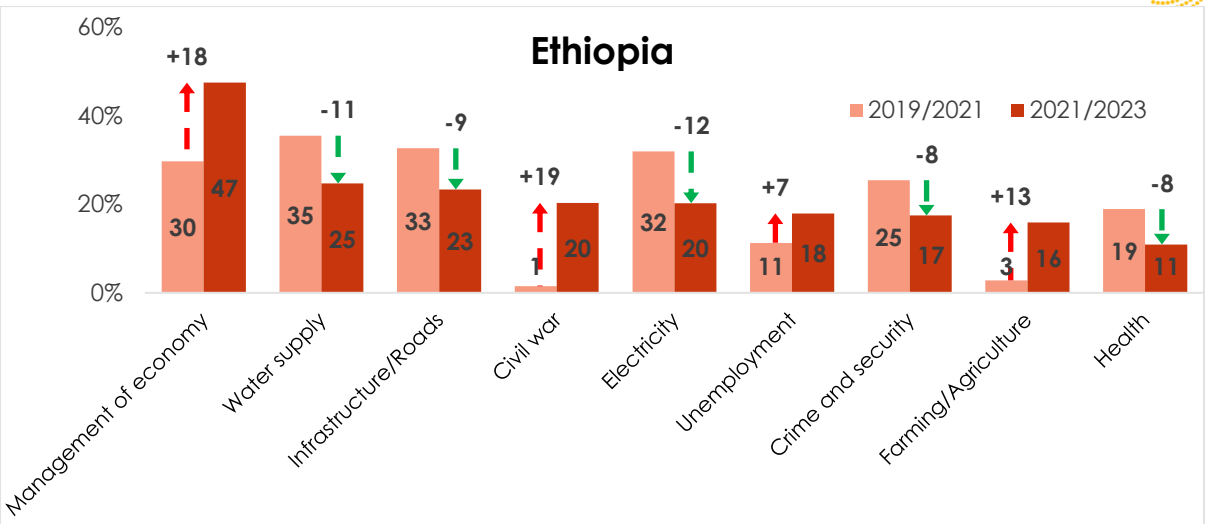


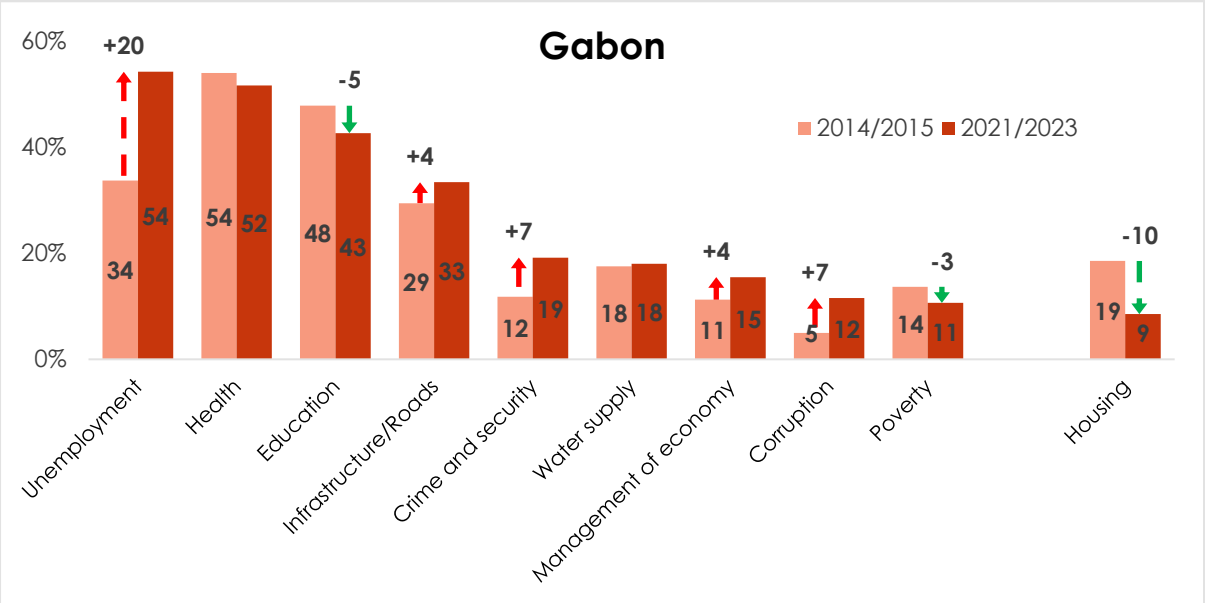
Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

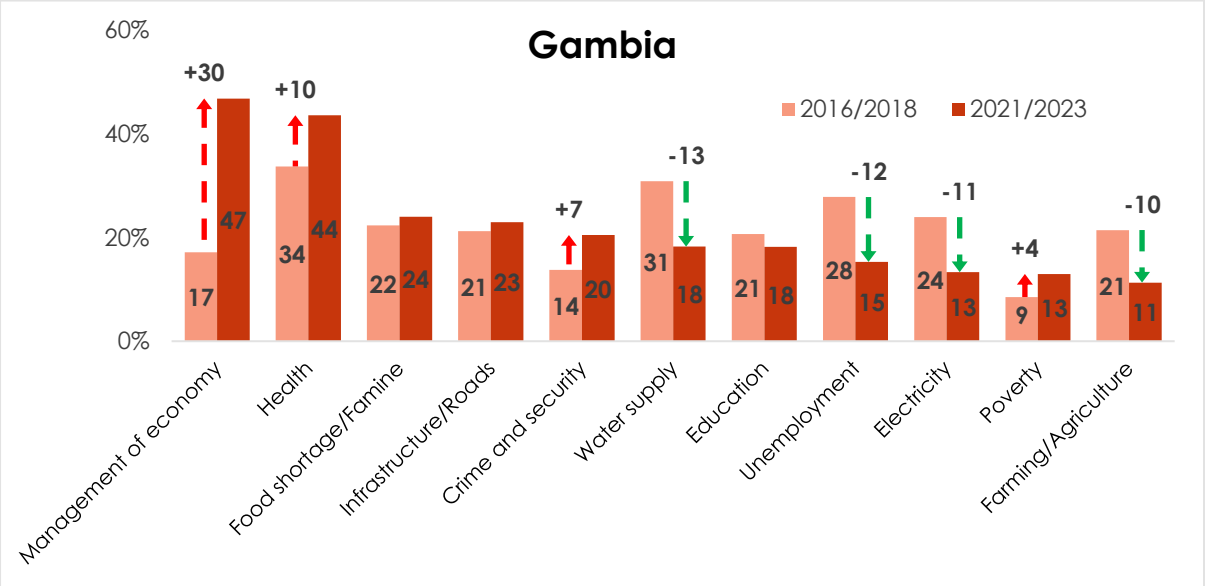

Congo-Brazzaville
2021/2023
60%
40%
20%
0%
47
37
35
29
25
25
20
13
10
10
Unemployment
Water supply
Infrastructure/Roads
Health
Crime and security
Education
Electricity
Corruption
Food shortage/Famine
Poverty


Côte d'Ivoire
2011/2013
2021/2023
60%
40%
20%
0%
38 39
35 32
+12
17 29
+8
17 25
+8
16 24
+7
16 23
23 22
22 20
-3
17 14
-8
20 12
+7
3 10
Unemployment
Health
Water supply
Education
Poverty
Crime and security
Infrastructure/Roads
Management of economy
Electricity
Food shortage/Famine
Corruption

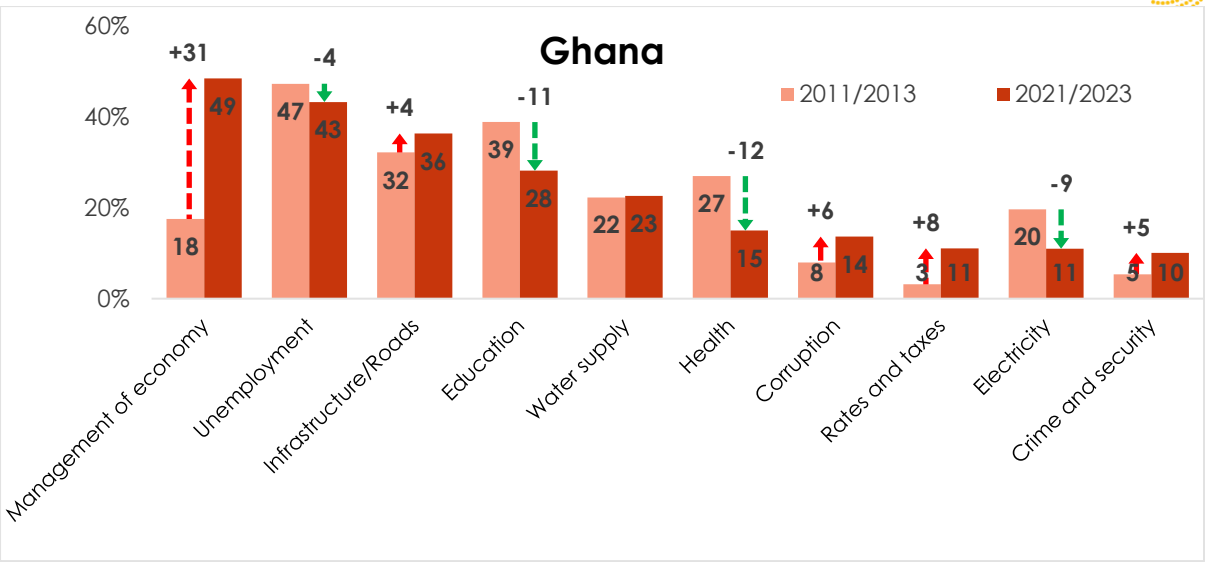

Eswatini
2011/2013
2021/2023
60%
40%
20%
0%
+9
42 50
+16
14 30
+10
17 27
+4
19 23
19 18
-3
18 15
+6
7 13
-5
18 12
-3
15 12
-16
23 8
Unemployment
Incomes
Education
Health
Infrastructure/Roads
Management of economy
Democracy/Pol. rights
Water supply
Food shortage/Famine
Poverty

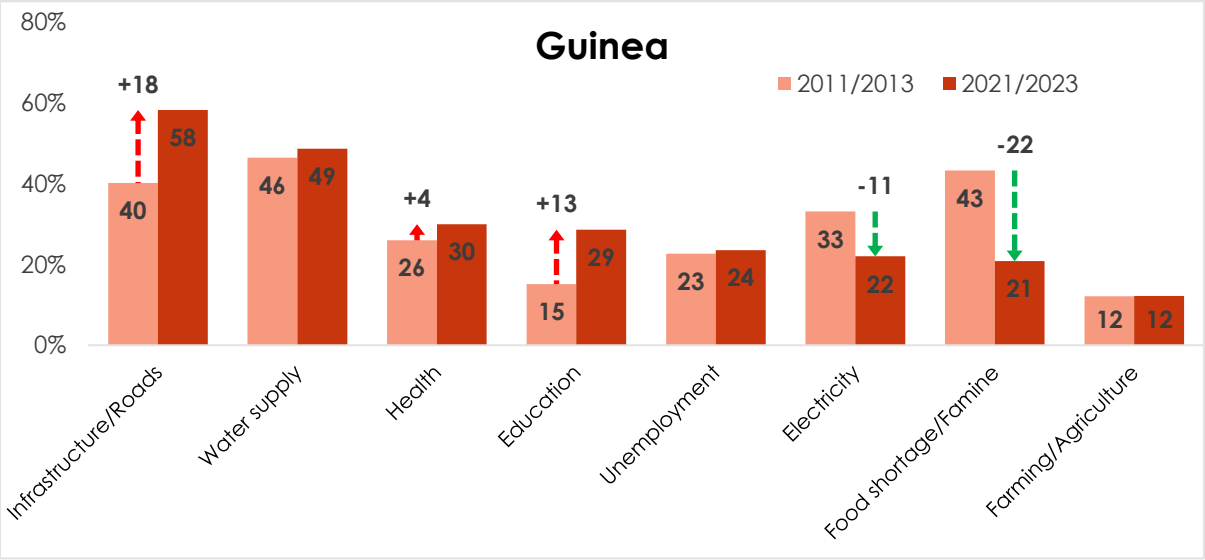


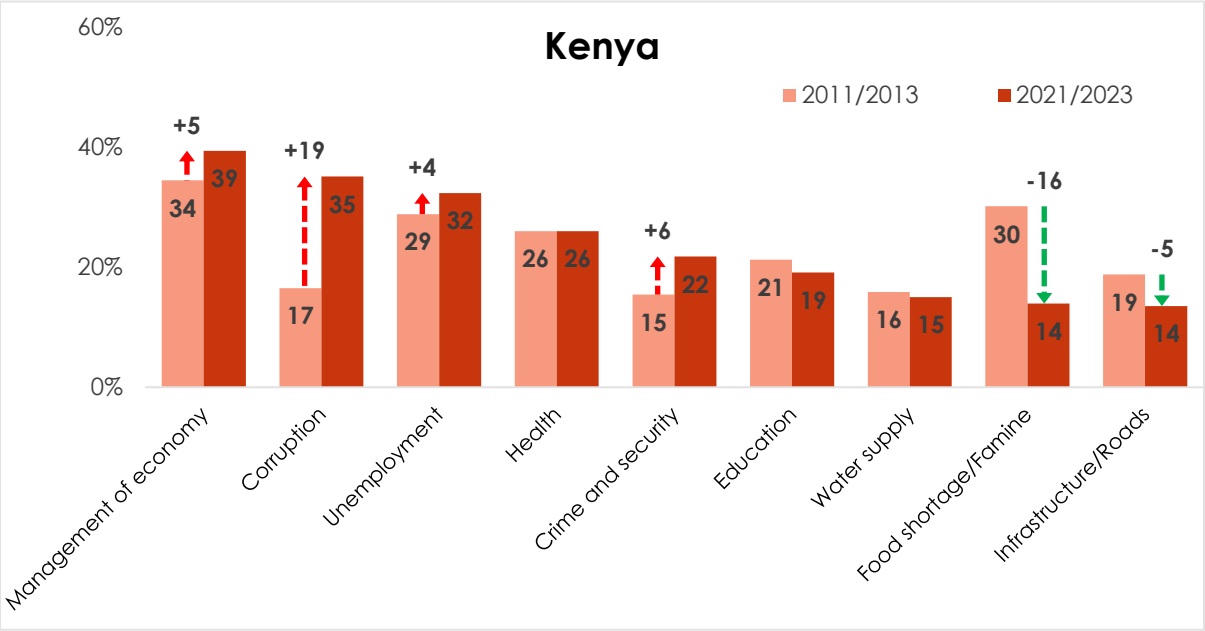




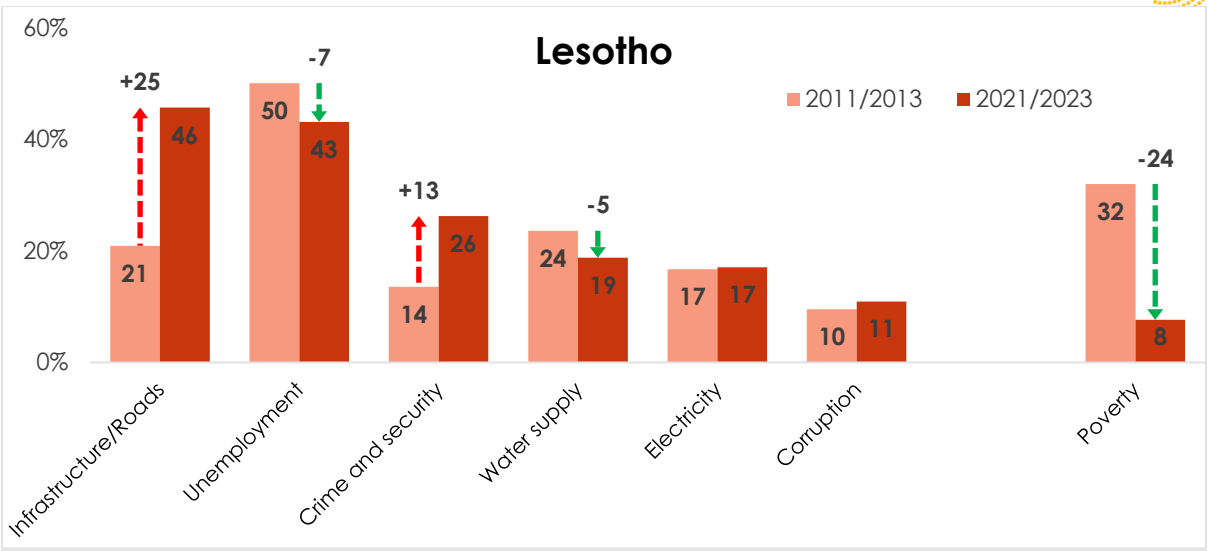
Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

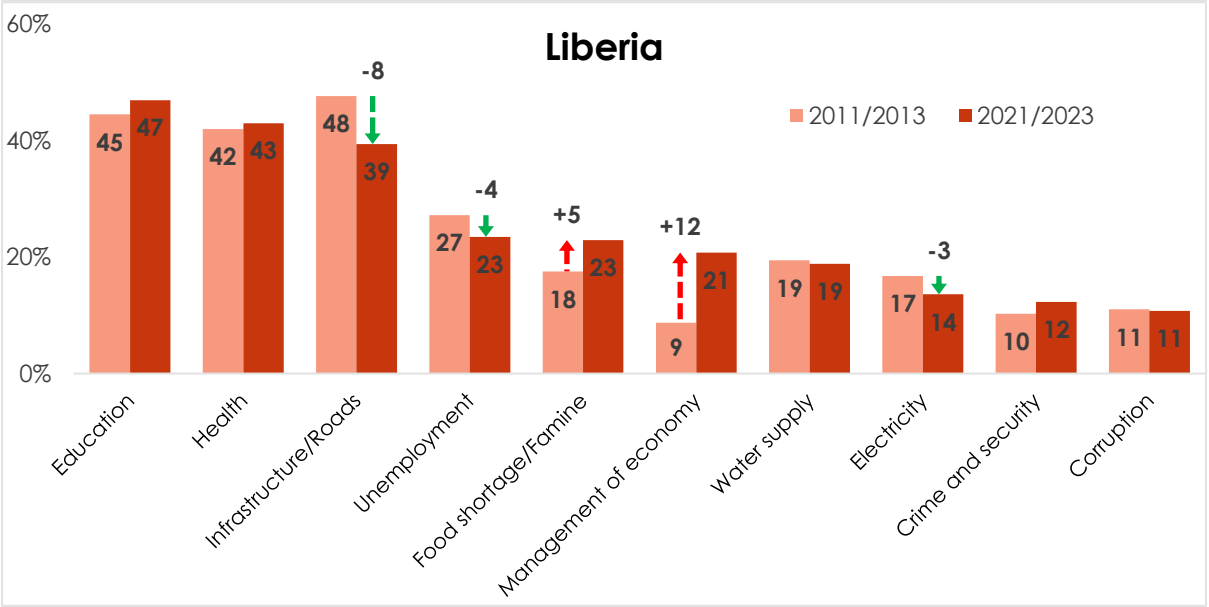


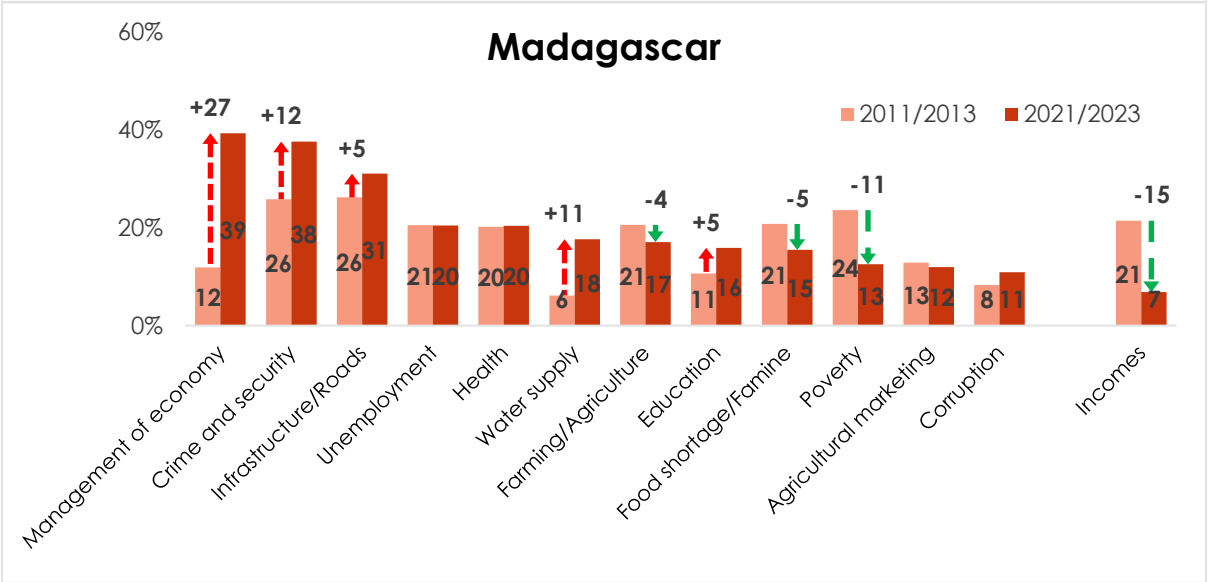




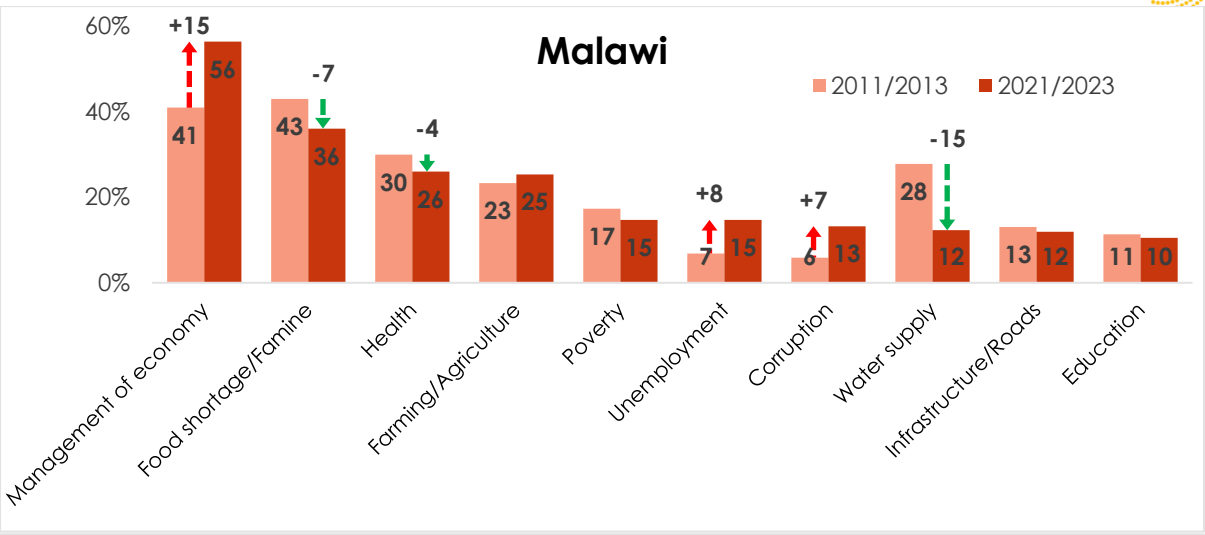
Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

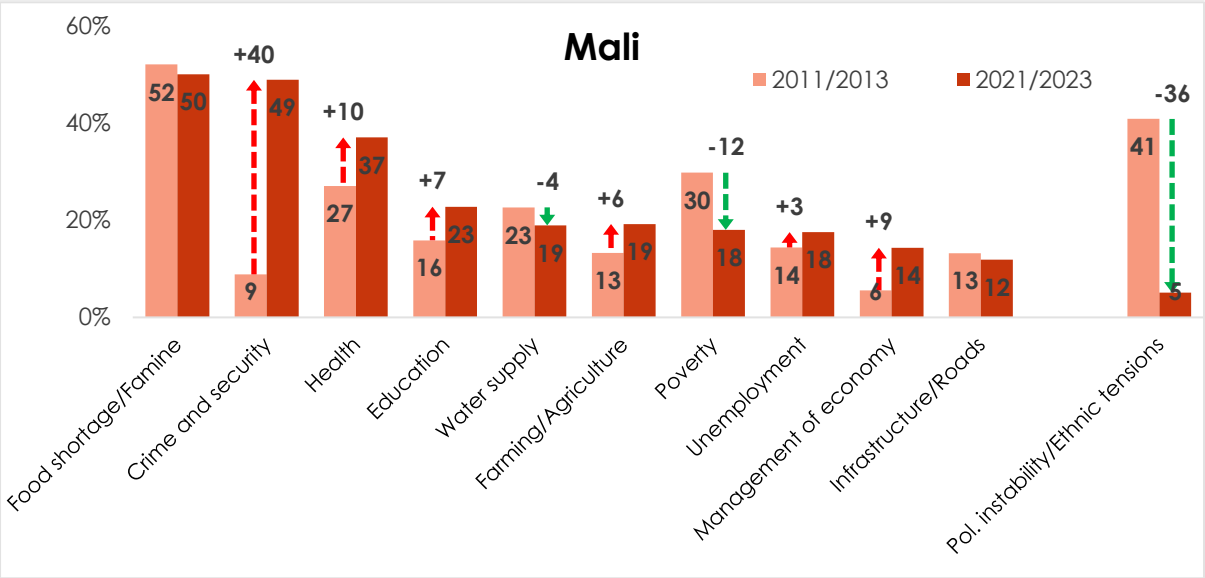


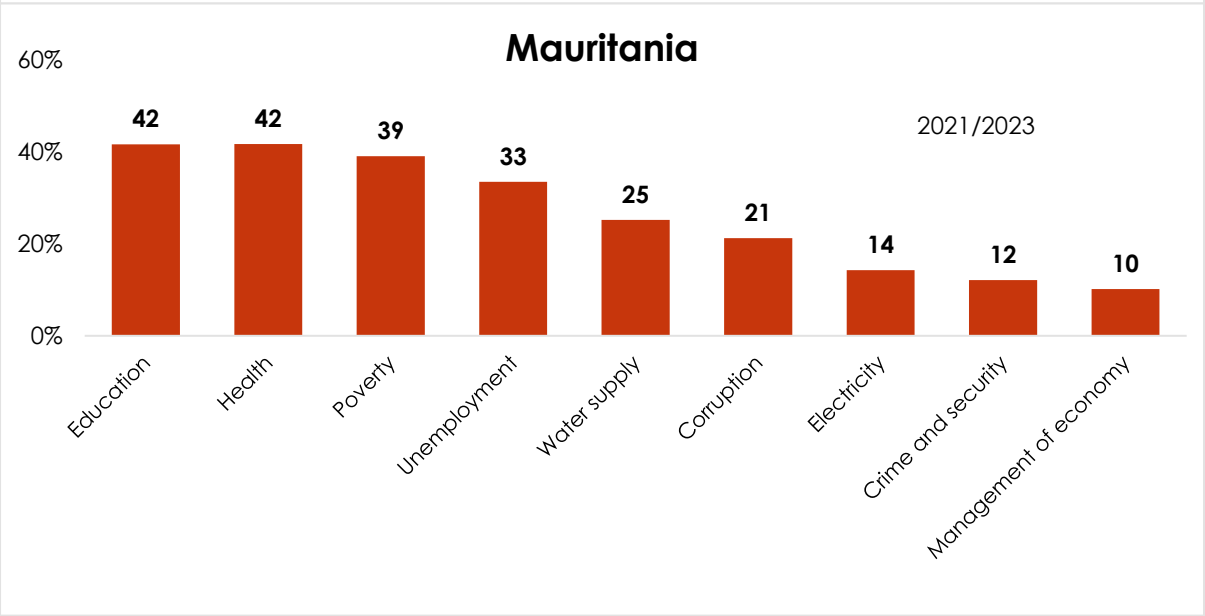




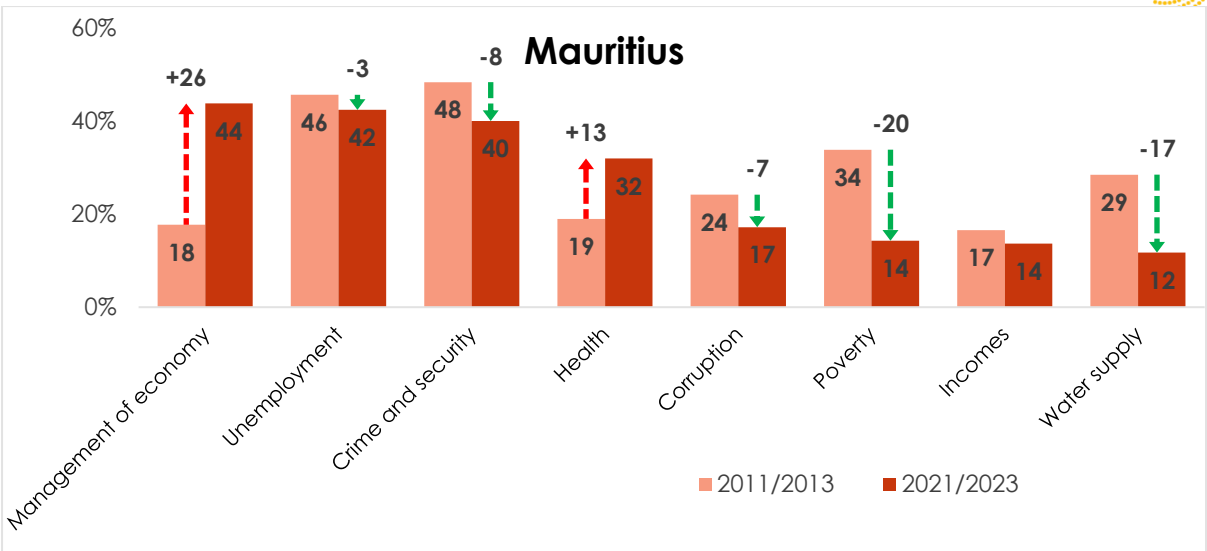
Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

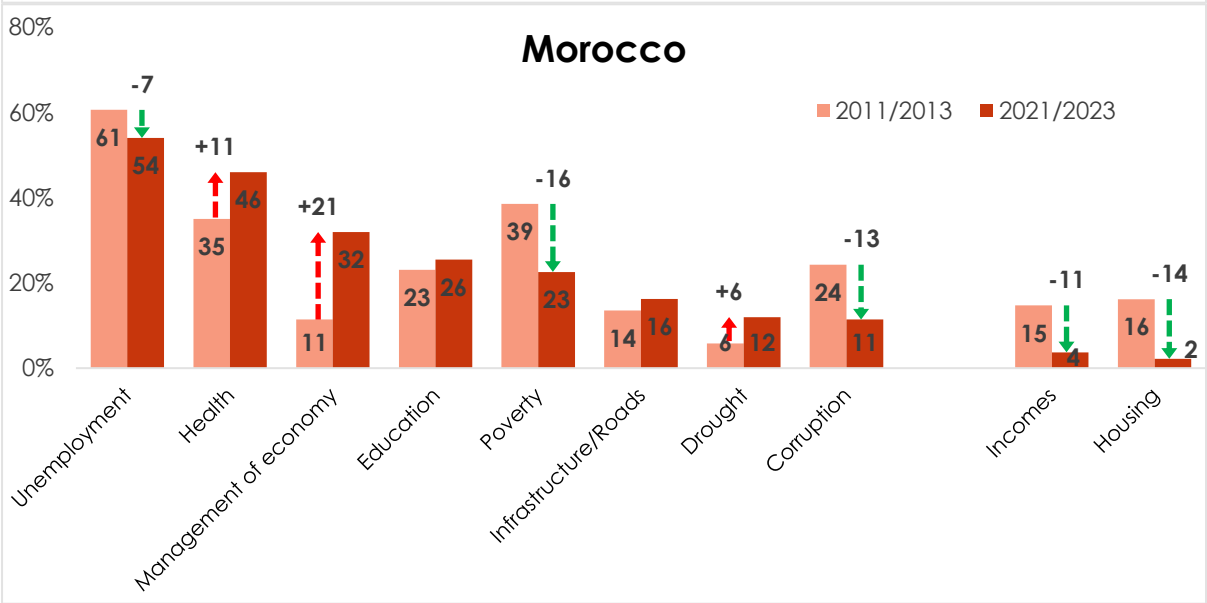


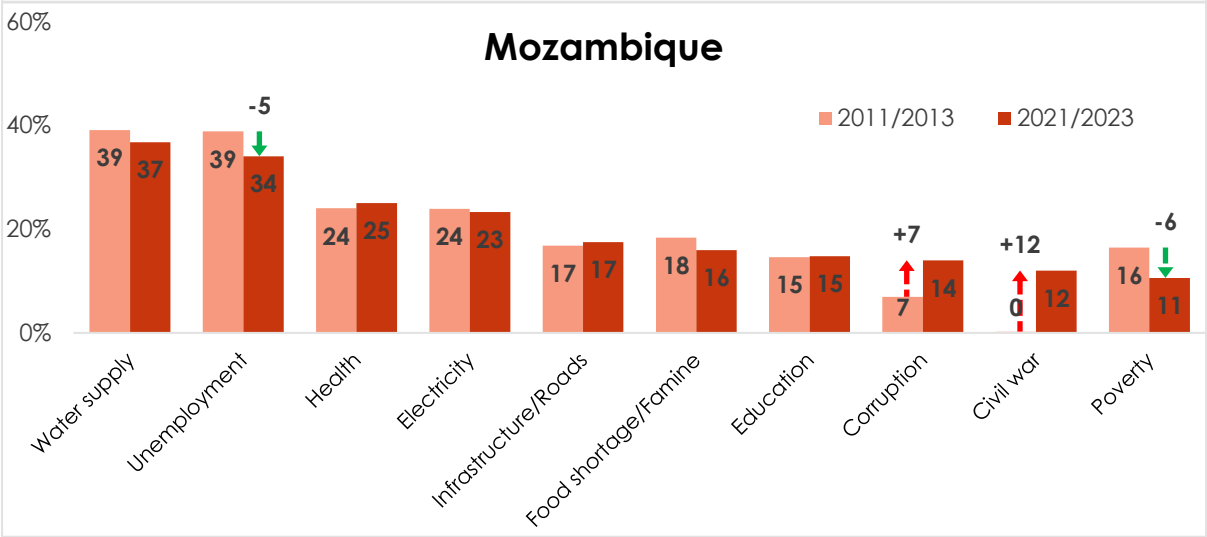




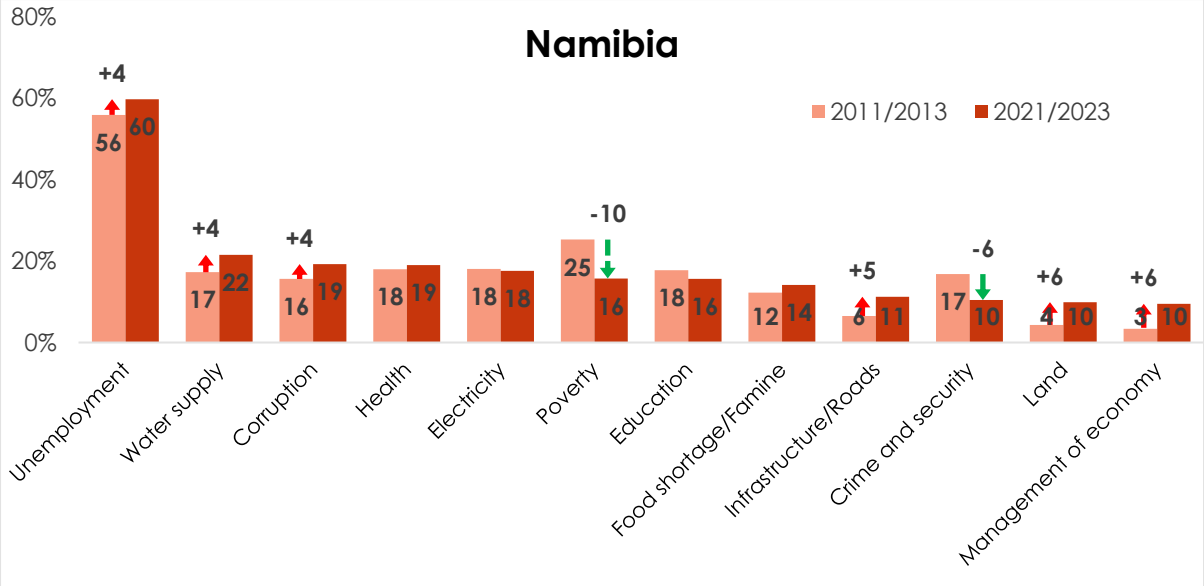
Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

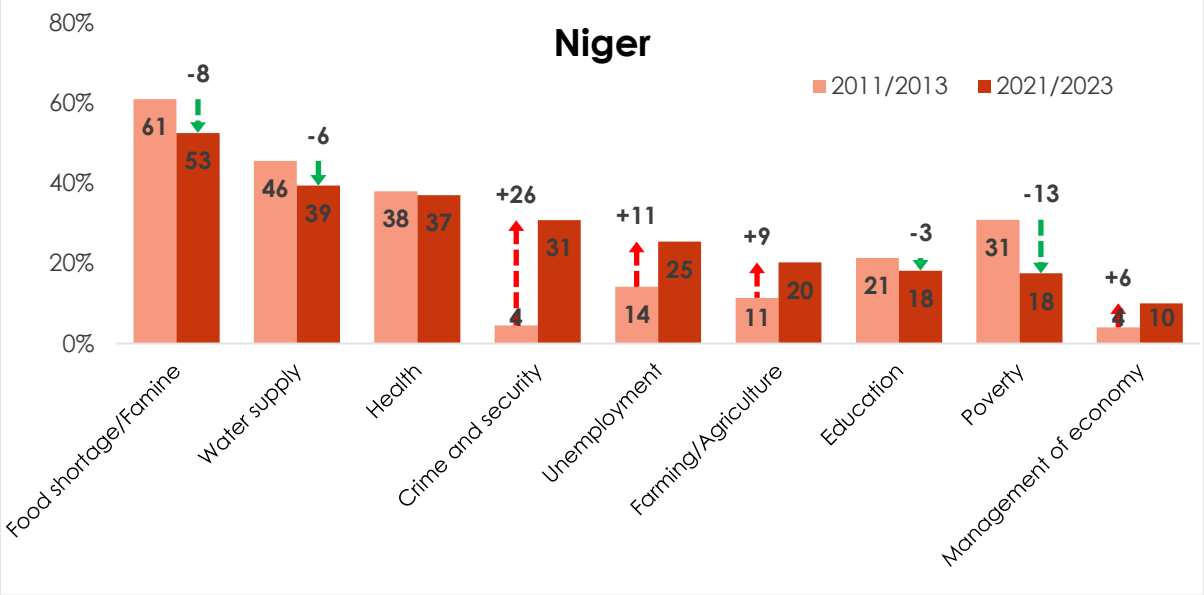


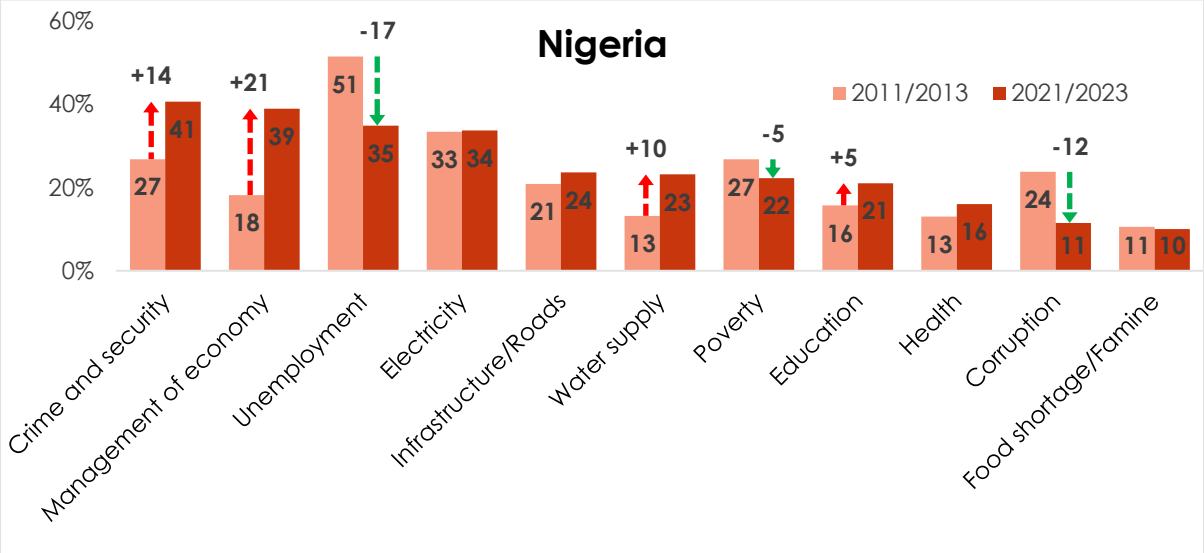




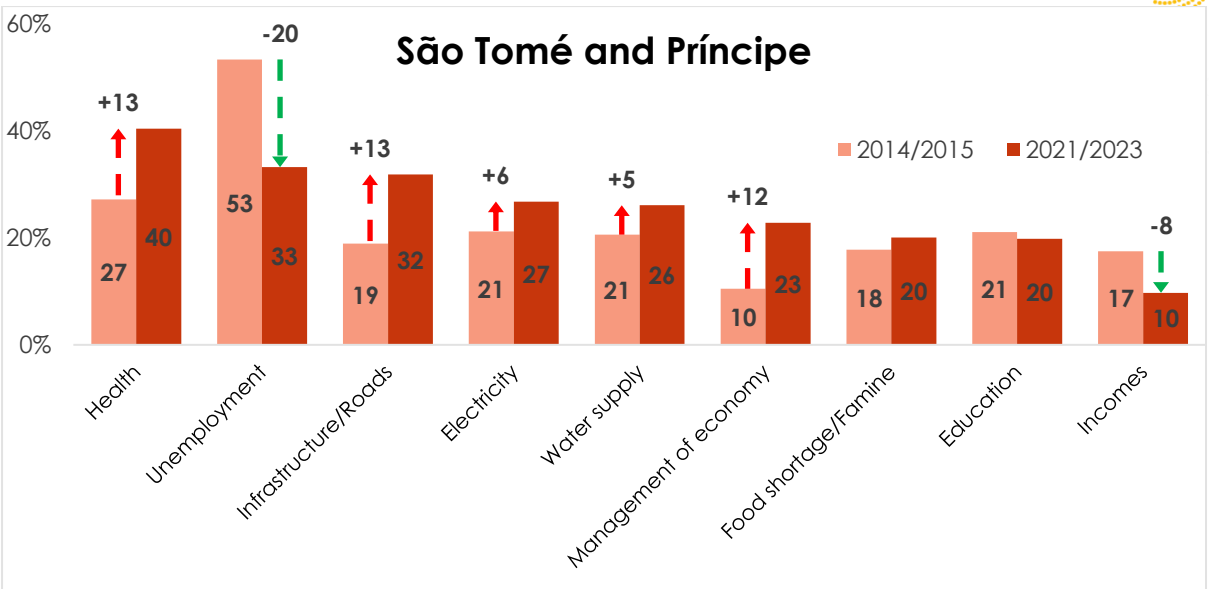
Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

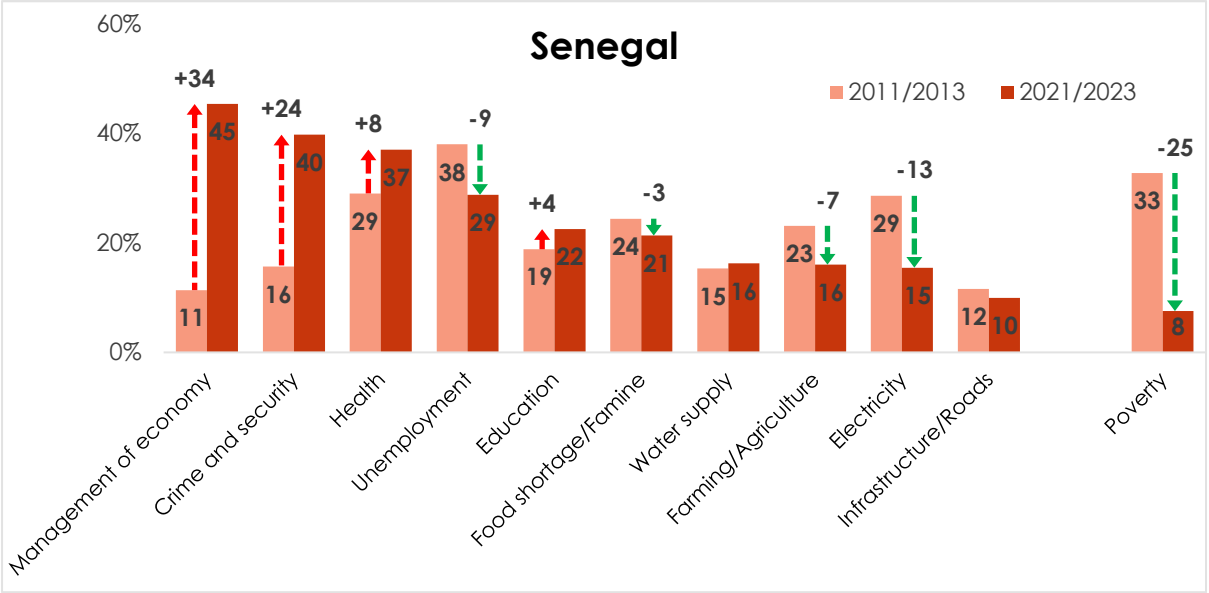


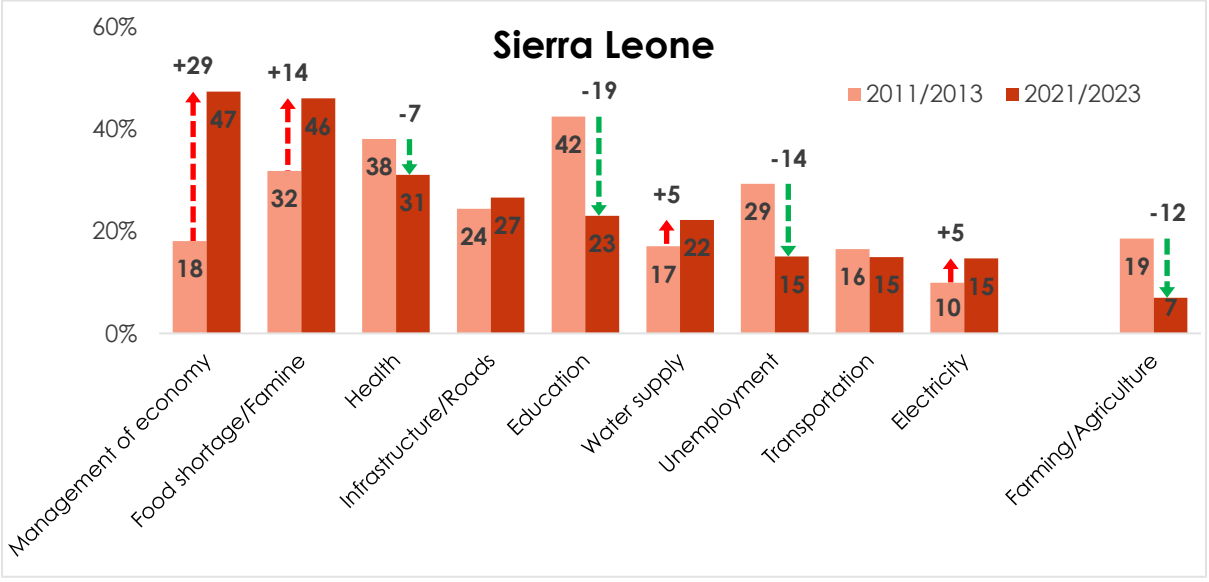




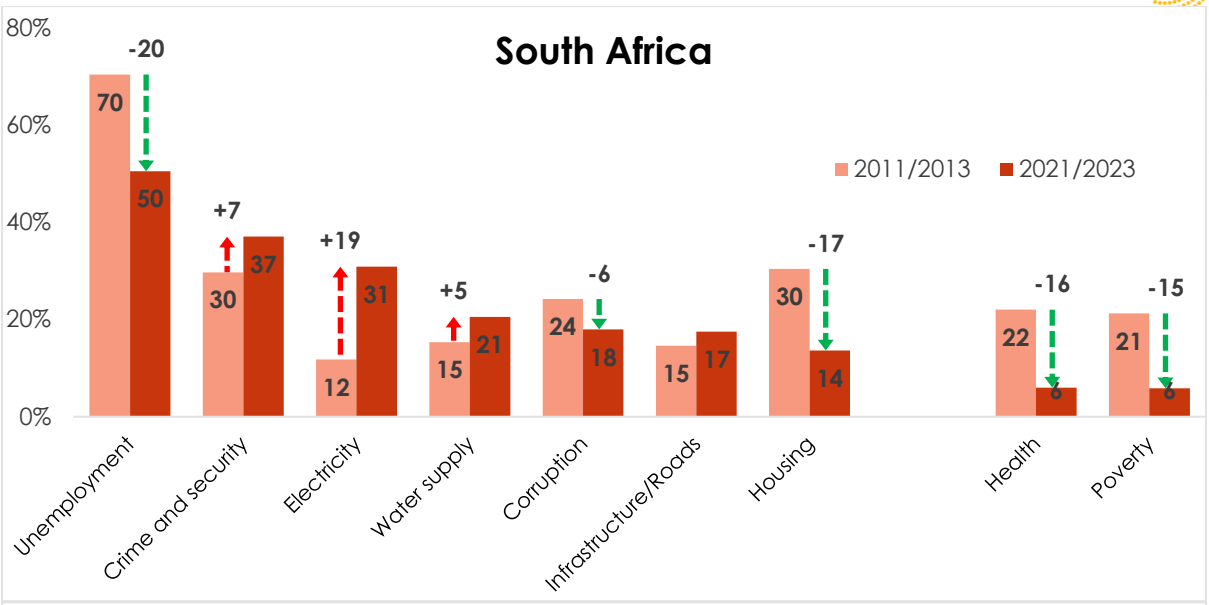
Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

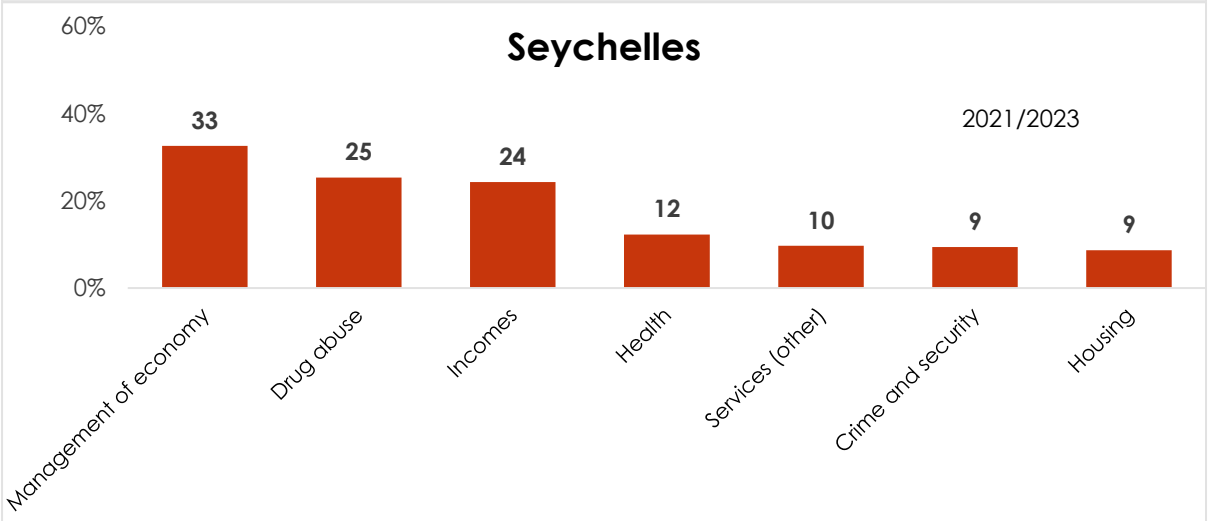


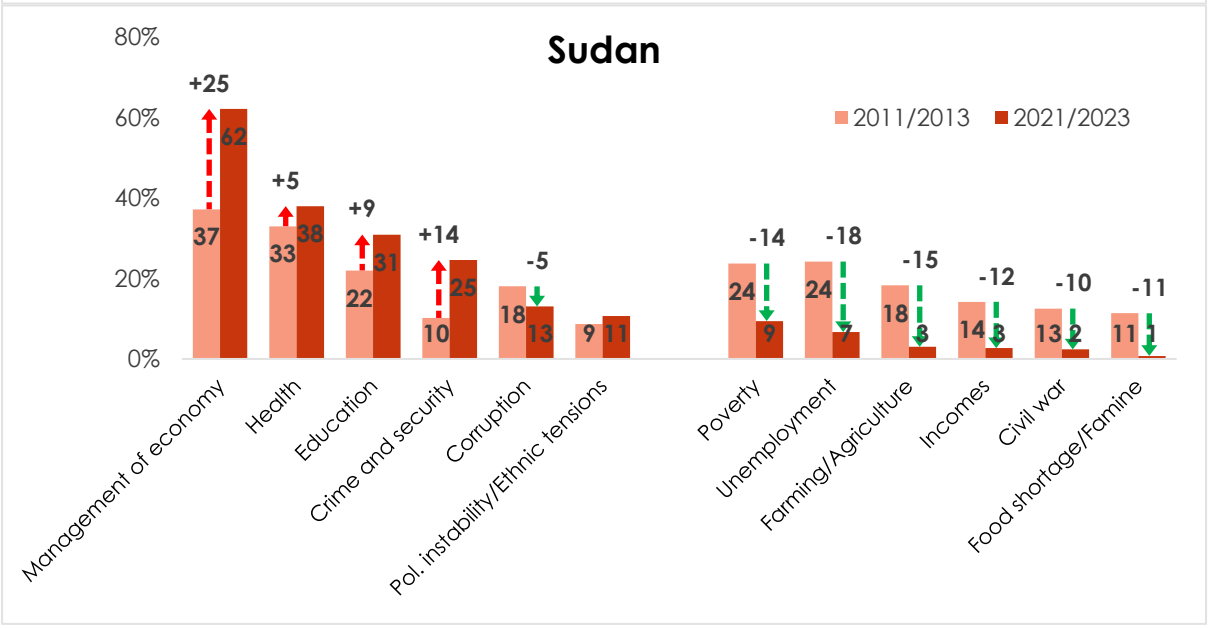




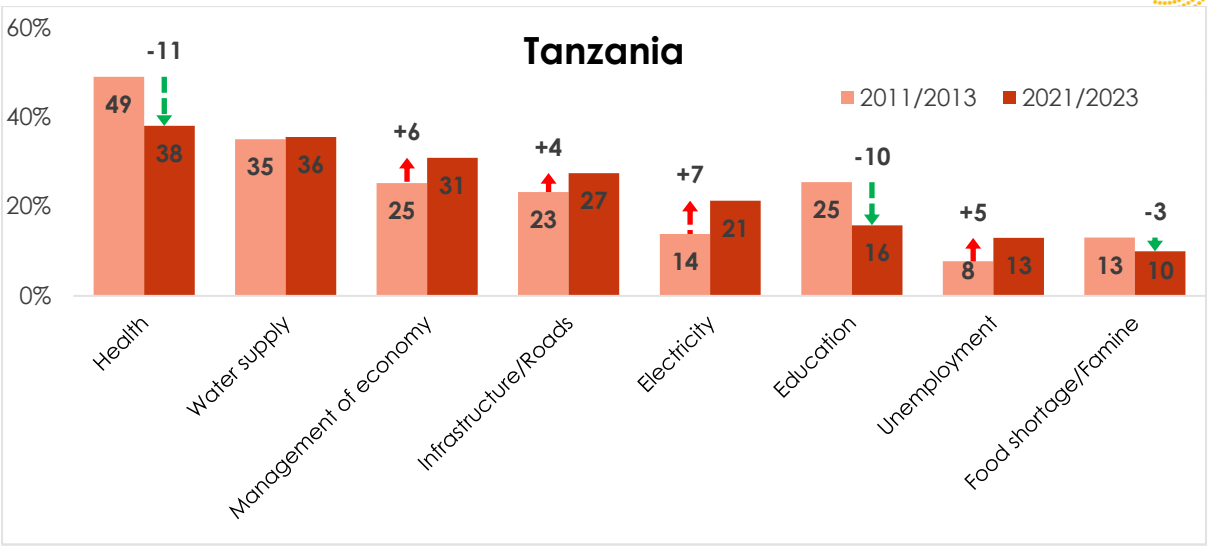
Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

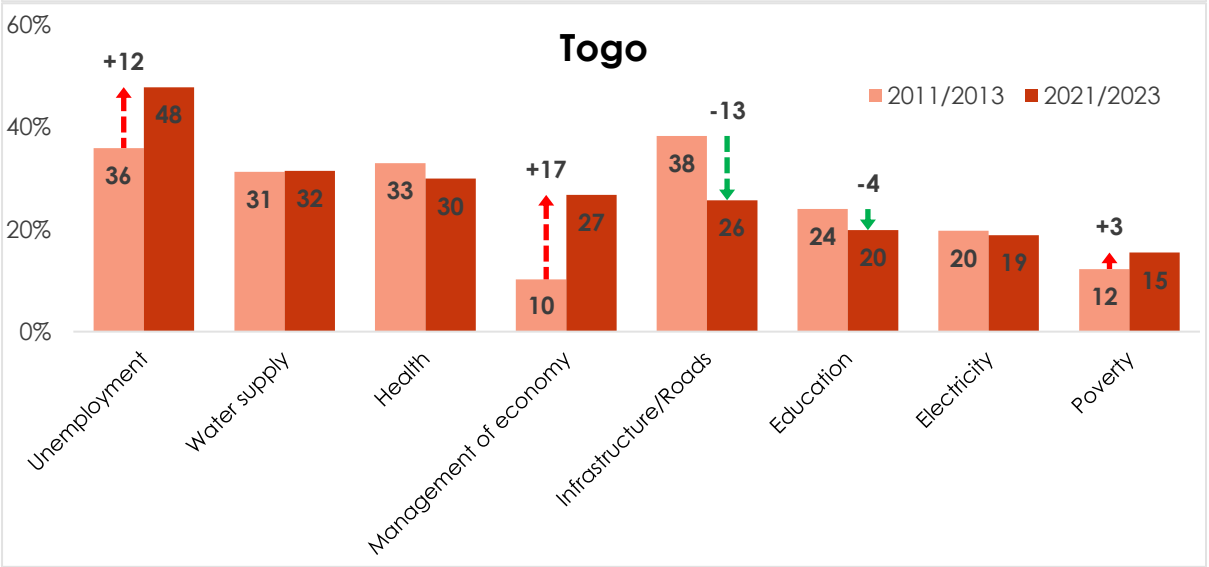


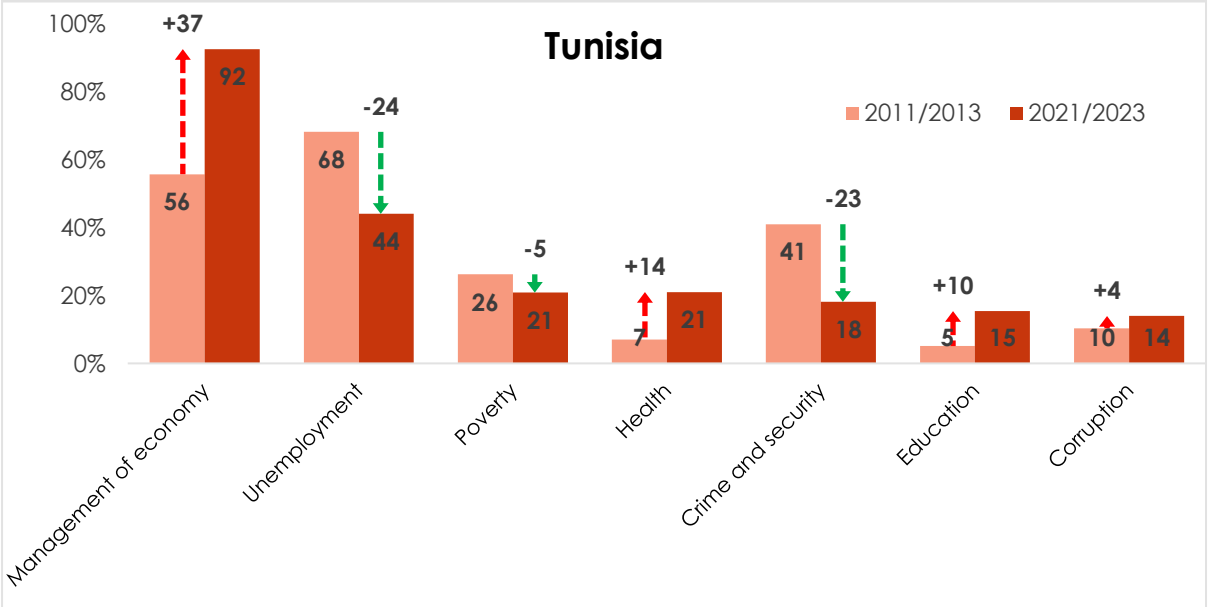




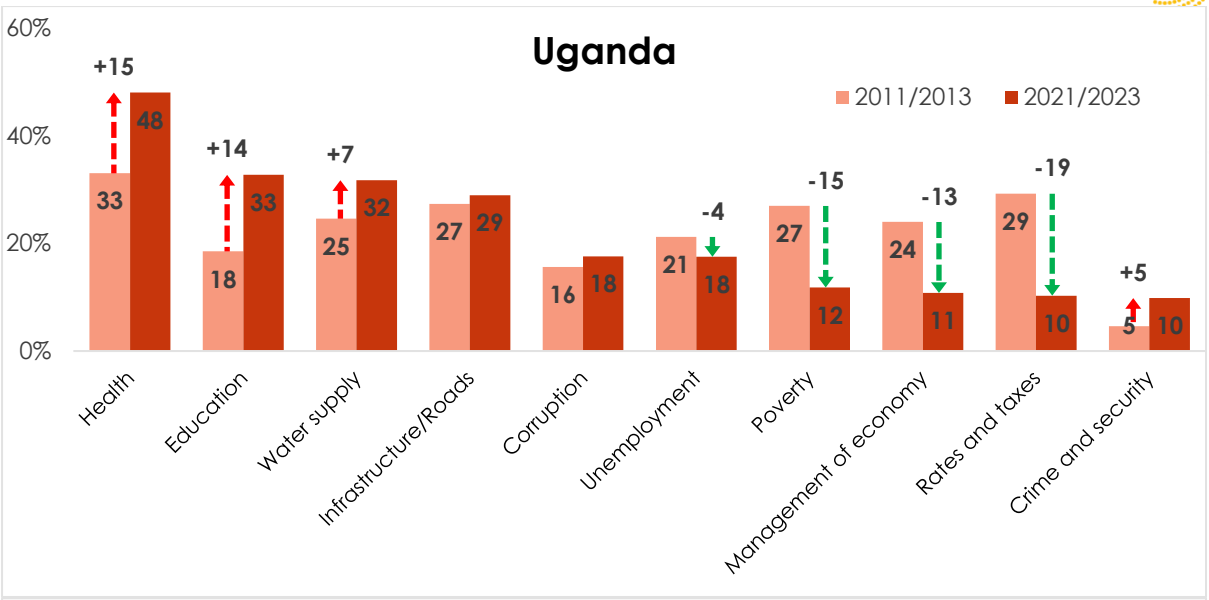
Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

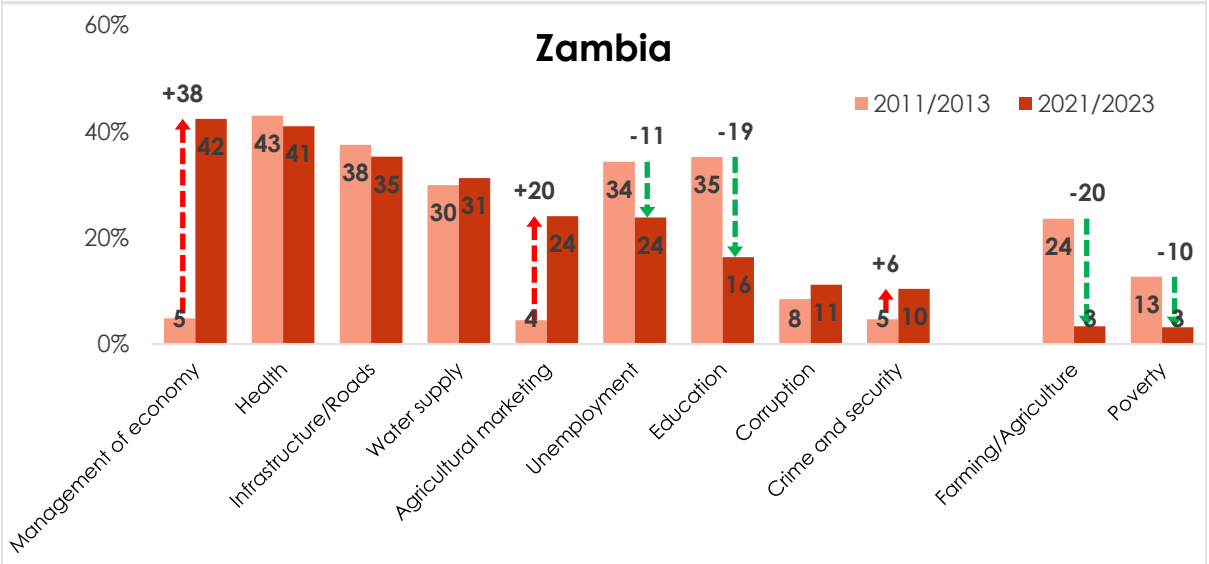


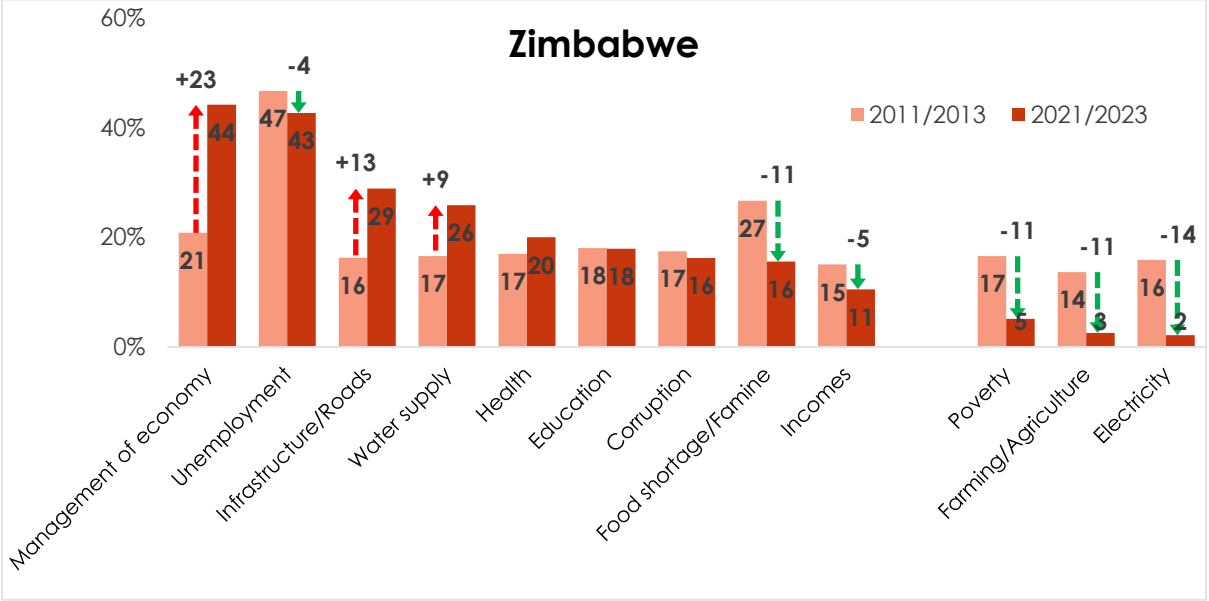




Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024







Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

References

African Union. (2015). Agenda 2063: The Africa we want.

Mattes, R., & Patel, J. (2022). Lived poverty resurgent. Afrobarometer Policy Paper 84.

United Nations. (2024). The 17 goals. Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 9 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds

Country	Round 9 fieldwork	Previous survey rounds
Angola	Feb.-March 2022	2019
Benin	Jan. 2022	2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2020
Botswana	June-July 2022	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Burkina Faso	Sept.-Oct. 2022	2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019
Cabo Verde	July-Aug. 2022	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2019
Cameroon	March 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Congo-Brazzaville	June-July 2023	NA
Côte d'Ivoire	Nov.-Dec. 2021	2013, 2014, 2017, 2019
Eswatini	Oct.-Nov. 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Ethiopia	May-June 2023	2013, 2020
Gabon	Nov.-Dec. 2021	2015, 2017, 2020
Gambia	Aug.-Sept. 2022	2018, 2021
Ghana	April 2022	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Guinea	Aug. 2022	2013, 2015, 2017, 2019
Kenya	Nov.-Dec. 2021	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2019
Lesotho	Feb.-March 2022	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2020
Liberia	Aug.-Sept. 2022	2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2020
Madagascar	April-May 2022	2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2018
Malawi	Feb. 2022	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Mali	July 2022	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020
Mauritania	Nov. 2022	NA
Mauritius	March 2022	2012, 2014, 2017, 2020
Morocco	Aug.-Sept. 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Mozambique	Oct.-Nov. 2022	2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2021
Namibia	Oct.-Nov. 2021	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Niger	June 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2020
Nigeria	March 2022	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2020
São Tomé and Príncipe	Dec. 2022	2015, 2018
Senegal	May-June 2022	2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2021
Seychelles	Dec. 2022	NA
Sierra Leone	June-July 2022	2012, 2015, 2018, 2020
South Africa	Nov.-Dec. 2022	2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, 2021
Sudan	Nov.-Dec. 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Tanzania	Sept.-Oct. 2022	2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2021
Togo	March 2022	2012, 2014, 2017, 2021
Tunisia	Feb.-March 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2020
Uganda	Jan. 2022	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019
Zambia	Aug.-Sept. 2022	1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020
Zimbabwe	March-April 2022	1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2021

Copyright ©Afrobarometer 2024

Authors

Carolyn Logan is director of analysis and capacity building for Afrobarometer and associate professor in the Department of Political Science at Michigan State University. Email: clogan@afrobarometer.org.

Mohamed Najib Ben Saad is a data quality officer for Afrobarometer. Email: mohamednajibbensaad@afrobarometer.org.

About Data for Governance Alliance

The Data for Governance Alliance is a four-year project that promotes data-based advocacy and engagement between pan African civil society organisations (CSOs) and African Union organs. The project is led by Afrobarometer with partners, including CDD Ghana, the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Nairobi, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and Laws.Africa. The project is funded by the European Union.

Data for Governance Alliance

African voices for African policy

AFRO BAROMETER

Let the people have a say

CDD-GHANA

UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI

INSTITUTE FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES (IDS)

IJR

THE INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

LAWS.AFRICA

Funded by the European Union